Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ROBIN WHITE

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 30th of June, 2005. This is an interview with Robin White. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Robin, let's start at the beginning; when and where you were born?

WHITE: I was born in Fall River, Massachusetts in 1950 about 50 miles south of Boston, a depressed city that had been a textile town.

Q: Fall River. Is this Lizzie Borden's town?

WHITE: It is indeed.

Q: Poor kid, she was an orphan, wasn't she?

WHITE: Yes, she certainly was after her father and stepmother were murdered. But she was acquitted and lived to an old age.

Q: Could you tell me a bit about your father's side, where the family came from and then on your mother's side.

WHITE: I come from a fairly traditional American family in that several ethnic groups met up. My father had a German mother and a Scottish father. My grandfather came from Glasgow when he was four or five years ago and they ended up in Cleveland, Ohio. My father grew up there. He was the roller skating champion of the U.S. for a couple of years and had a case of medals in the basement. He joined the military in World War II and was in the Pacific in the navy.

Q: Did he talk much about what he did in the war?

WHITE: Not when I was growing up, though later he talked a bit about being on an island and watching a volcano erupt on the other end where the Japanese were. Luckily he wasn't involved in any heavy combat, or at least if he was he didn't talk about it. When I was assigned to Japan I asked him how he felt about visiting there given his war experiences. He said he would have some qualms about such a trip, but in the end it was more practical and logistical problems that kept my parents from visiting. I think that the very positive experiences my daughter and I had changed his viewpoint about the Japanese.

Q: What did your grandparents on your father's side do?

WHITE: My grandfather was a skilled blue collar worker. I don't think he was educated past high school. My grandmother took care of four boys. My father went to business school.

Q: What did your father do?

WHITE: As the war was ending he met my mother in Newport where she was working at the naval base after going to secretarial school. When they married he settled in Massachusetts and joined my maternal grandfather's business which was running a small retail liquor store. He stayed with the business and became very active in the national association.

Q: What about your mother's side of the family?

WHITE: My mother is of Irish and French Canadian background. My grandfather's family came from Quebec; there was a lot of intermingling of New Englanders and French Canadians during that period. He ran several businesses including a furniture store during prohibition days. He had owned a couple of restaurants and clubs before that and finally ended up in the retail liquor store business. My grandmother was of Irish background, one of four sisters. Her mother, my great-grandmother, was the mainstay of the family and supported them by doing laundry for the rich textile owners in Fall River.

Q: Do you have brothers or sisters?

WHITE: I have an older sister who is three years older and a younger brother who is three years younger. My parents believed that higher education was very important and they were extremely supportive of us. My sister was the first in the family to graduate from a four year college.

Q: Where did you go to college?

WHITE: I went to Georgetown School of Foreign Service.

Q: What was Fall River like when you were a young kid? I assume you grew up there, didn't you?

WHITE: I grew up in a town across the river called Somerset, which was somewhat greener and more pleasant than Fall River, which at the time was rather bleak. Fall River had been a textile center but many of the mills had moved south. I worked in a mill during a high school summer, which convinced me the value of a college education as it was a miserable job. The area kept its strong ethnic roots. For example, the Catholic churches are still identified as St. Patrick's the Irish church, St. John of God the Portuguese church, and St. Louis de France the French church. St. Thomas More was for a mixed group.

Q: Did you grow up as a Catholic?

WHITE: Yes.

Q: What was the church's influence on you?

WHITE: It was part of the routine and ritual of life for almost everyone in the area. Pretty much everybody went either to Sunday school for Protestants or after school catechism classes if you were Catholic and you were identified in a sense in that way. However there was no sense of separation or rivalries among Protestants and Catholics. There were some Jewish families but very much a minority. It was also a racially homogeneous town. There was one Chinese family and that was about it at the time in terms of ethnic diversity, no blacks or Hispanics.

Q: How about elementary school?

WHITE: I went to a public elementary school three blocks away from my house. I walked to school, home for lunch, and back to school under the guidance of 6th grade patrol leaders. I also went to public high school.

Q: How did you like school?

WHITE: I enjoyed school and didn't have many problems. I guess I was a fairly bright student and hope not too much of a teacher's pet.

Q: As a child and as you grew up, were you much of a reader?

WHITE: Yes, I read a great deal and developed a love of libraries that I still have. We didn't have summer-long camps or many organized activities, so those were the days when you sat under a tree in the summer, played cards, occasionally had a glass of lemonade and didn't have a schedule so did a great deal of reading. Living in a small town I was able to walk to the library whenever I wanted and early on discovered a wider world through books.

Q: Can you think of any books as a kid that you really liked?

WHITE: I read the Nancy Drew books, which girls all did at that time. There was an interesting series called the Lives of the Saints for children. Historical novels like stories about Princess Elizabeth in the Tower of London caught my attention so I've always had an affinity for British history, probably dating back to childhood reading of stories about the monarchs.

Q: Then you went to high school. What high school was that?

WHITE: Somerset High School.

Q: What was that like?

WHITE: It was very much a typical high school of the '60s. There wasn't too much teenage rebellion going on, in Somerset at least, so it was a very conventional upbringing. I was active in yearbook and in the marching band playing saxophone.

Q: What was your family's expectation about college?

WHITE: My parents just assumed that we three were going to college and lived very frugally to save for it. I remember one incident when we were reading a book called Wendy Scott, Secretary. That was my sister's name and my mother had bought the book because the author had gone to the same school she had attended. I read the book and it described a satisfying career for the main character. I mentioned that maybe I could be a secretary. I remember my father saying very strongly, "You're not going to be a secretary. You're going to have secretaries." I thought that was a pretty good vote of confidence in a 10-year-old.

Q: Did you have summer jobs?

WHITE: Yes, I started working as soon as I turned 16. Before that I had been baby-sitting and doing other odd jobs. I began working as a waitress in a Friendly's Ice Cream store and did that for several years during the summer and part time during the school year. I was also a swimming instructor for the town program during the summer.

A job I wanted - and didn't get - was that of a Congressional page. I wrote to my senators and was told "no girls need apply."

Q: In high school were there any courses that you particularly liked and ones that you didn't like?

WHITE: English, particularly literature, and history were always the courses I found the most interesting. I got through math and science well enough, but my interest didn't lie there.

Q: Did the outside world intrude much? You were in grammar school when Kennedy was elected. Did the family feel engaged in that campaign?

WHITE: No, not really, though the assassination in 1963 affected everyone deeply, particularly Massachusetts Catholics. Vietnam was beginning to be a major issue during my high school years, 1964-1968.

Q: While you were in high school were you reading the daily papers at all?

WHITE: I was, but the local paper wasn't very good. It focused on local issues with one page or so international news. Of course I was more concerned as I approached the college years. In 1968, the year I graduated from high school, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed. At that time as I was getting ready to go to Washington in July or August, Washington erupted in riots, which must have made my parents quite nervous.

Q: You went to Georgetown. Why Georgetown?

WHITE: The School of Foreign Service. I always had an interest in other cultures, and heard the phrase "Foreign Service" sometime in my high school years. The guidance counselor suggested various women's colleges in New England and was a little taken aback that I was so set on Georgetown. No one from my high school had previously gone there.

Q: You went there in '68?

WHITE: Yes. An interesting thing was that during my interview, the admissions officer said quite bluntly that girls had to have college board scores 100 points higher than boys - and they did talk about boys and girls then. It was clear discrimination. They only wanted a few girls because they assumed girls would all get married anyway. At that time it didn't occur to me to rail against the injustice; I just thought of it as a challenge.

Q: I suppose in every generation there are obstacles put up that are perceived by the next generation as being obstacles but the generation then just saw them as something to deal with.

WHITE: Yes, that's true.

Q: You mentioned the Martin Luther King riots and the burning and the troops in Washington?

WHITE: Yes, that was the summer of '68 as I was preparing and packing up and getting ready to go.

Q: Your parents must not have liked seeing pictures of the 82nd Airborne on the streets of Georgetown.

WHITE: Exactly. My sister had gone to a women's college Boston and was just an hour away, so they certainly worried more about me.

Q: Had you been to Washington before, had you been on a school trip or something like that?

WHITE: There had been a family trip when I was 10 or 12 and then I came down with my father for an interview in the spring to see the campus, which I loved. And I was happy to be in Washington, an exciting international city.

Q: In the first place, what did they do with the women in those days at Georgetown?

WHITE: For dormitories, they put us in with the nursing students, the college with the most women, and the women in the School of Language and Linguistics. There were two dorms close to the hospital, St. Mary's and Darnell Hall. St. Mary's pretty much had all the freshmen girls. At that time they still had parietal rules, which are rules for girls' behavior. We had to be by 10:00 on weeknights and 11:00 or 12:00 on weekends and couldn't have any males in the room. After the riots and the tear gas and upheavals of the next few years, those rules disappeared completely. By the time I left in 1971 the "parietals" had disappeared.

Q: Did you concentrate on any particular area in the School of Foreign Service?

WHITE: I had taken French in high school but I had read a lot of Dostoyevsky so I decided to take Russian. I began the language and took various courses in Russian history, Soviet economics, etc., so that was my area of geographic concentration. The Foreign Service students all took history, government and economics courses, a triple major.

Q: Was this your real first exposure to people looking seriously at the world beyond?

WHITE: It was my first exposure to a diverse group of people and first exposure to city life and to an atmosphere where everybody was intellectually engaged and ready to work hard. I enjoyed college.

Q: When you got there in '68 things were really cranking up in Vietnam. What was happening on the Georgetown campus?

WHITE: Most people were against the war and there was a sense already that it was a war that could not be won militarily or politically. Student opposition was not surprising since all the young men were subject to the draft at that time. One of my vivid memories is watching TV in a dorm lobby with a group of friends, male and female, as they read off the lottery numbers which were based on birthdays. If a young man got a low number, he felt quite desperate, for that meant Vietnam. Some of the reaction was self-preservation, but in large part the feeling was that this was a bad war at the wrong time with the U.S. Army supporting a corrupt regime. It was a difficult period.

Q: Did the campus authorities intervene? Were there demonstrations?

WHITE: There were no demonstrations, no taking over halls or disrupting classes on the campus. However Georgetown students participated in the marches that took place in Washington. There were several very large ones with several hundred thousand people while I was there and I participated in them as well. One time, perhaps 1970 or 1971, after Kent State, there were nearby incidents just off campus. Tear gas was used and I got a dose when I walked outside my apartment door. It was a miserable, unpleasant experience. Finals were postponed because there was still tear gas hanging all over the campus. So things were disrupted in D.C., but not specifically at Georgetown by Georgetown students.

Q: How did you find the Washington experience?

WHITE: It was an exciting city for many reasons. I was then and am still very fond of classical music and hadn't had much opportunity to hear professionals while in high school. In D.C. I went to Constitution Hall, the main site for concerts before the Kennedy Center. I was at some of the opening concerts of the Kennedy Center and that continues to be an important part of my life. I also got involved in the campaign to lower the voting age to 18 and joined a couple of international clubs. There were also stimulating professors and speakers on campus.

Q: What was the view of the Soviet Union at that time?

WHITE: The view was that the Soviet Union was an unchanging monolith. It was a system was going to exist for some time, and the U.S. had learned to live with the situation. One of my classes was on the Soviet economy. While the course did go into the problems of the economy, the sense was that the Soviet Union was so big and had so many resources that it could continue to move ponderously along.

Q: Were there any teachers that particularly engaged you?

WHITE: A famous Georgetown personality was Professor Quigley. He gave the freshman Introduction to Civilization course. It was an excellent course and in addition to teaching about early history, he also taught logical thinking. He had very clear ideas about how you were supposed to answer questions and analyze events. Like many of his students, I still remember some of that. Another interesting character was an elderly Jesuit, Father Fadner, who taught Russian history. He would sweep into class in a black cape and a black beret and give detailed, fascinating lectures. And I had very strong economics professors beginning with micro and macro 101. I took those courses because they were required, but my first professor was so good that I ended up spending much of my Foreign Service career doing economic and trade work. I took no Asia-related courses, which is ironic given my later career path.

Q: While you were there did you find out more about the Foreign Service and the State Department?

WHITE: A lot of people at the School of Foreign Service were interested, but I don't remember any visits from FSOs or any special contacts.

Q: What about the student body of the School of Foreign Service? How did they strike you, where were they headed?

WHITE: A lot of the students were headed for the business world and the curriculum gave them a good basis for that. Only a few from my class ended up in the Foreign Service.

Q: What were the expectations for a young woman at that point?

WHITE: The expectation was that if you were there at the school, you were going to be using your education professionally.

Q: I mean were people just assuming you would get married?

WHITE: Most people assumed they would get married at some point. In fact I got married while I was in school to a classmate at Georgetown.

Q: What did he do?

WHITE: He was an English major and ended up working for a couple of political campaigns, including the McGovern presidential campaign. This happened right out of school and political consulting became his career. Being in Washington and at Georgetown, with opportunities in government and politics, greatly influenced our lives.

Q: Did you find yourself attracted to the political side as well?

WHITE: Yes, I was very interested as were most of my classmates. After all, it was the time of the Vietnam War and Watergate just a few years later. After I graduated I ended up working on the Hill for a year.

Q: I assume at some point you took the Foreign Service exam? Was it while you were in college?

WHITE: It was about a year later. I graduated from college in 1971, finishing in three years with summer school. I joined the Foreign Service in 1973, so took the written test in the fall of 1971 and the oral exam in spring of 1972.

Q: This was a big step for a married woman whose husband was on a different career track. How did this work out?

WHITE: We thought it would work out somehow. In fact my first two assignments were in Washington. By the time I was ready to go overseas we weren't married anymore, not because of the career paths, but clearly it would have been very complicated if we had still been married as his work was not mobile.

Q: You graduated in '71 and so you went to work on the Hill?

WHITE: Yes, I was looking for a job in government. I went to visit my Congresswoman, Margaret Heckler, a liberal Republican from Massachusetts, to make her acquaintance and talk to her staff. One of her staff called me a little while later to say they'd lost their receptionist and wondered if I would be interested. I did that job for a few months and then moved up in the office to do casework. I did that for a year and a half.

Q: Mrs. Heckler later was an ambassador, wasn't she?

WHITE: Yes, she was ambassador in Ireland.

Q: How did you find Margaret Heckler and working in her office?

WHITE: Mrs. Heckler was very personable and a very good politician and quite a thoughtful boss. At my level I didn't have a lot of substantive interaction with her. Working on the Hill was valuable experience and I would recommend it to anybody for a short time. You learn about the system and political personalities. I think it does have somewhat of a negative impact on people who are there too long because they see themselves as the center of the world, become convinced of their own importance, and lose touch with reality.

Q: How were things playing vis-ï¿½-vis the Vietnam War while you were working on the Hill?

WHITE: I don't remember specific votes. Mrs. Heckler was in a rather odd position being a Republican in a heavily Democratic area, but she was popular in both the Republican side of the district in the Boston suburbs down to the heavily Democratic area of Fall River. She voted in a fairly liberal way, at least for a Republican.

Q: Then you took the written exam and you passed it the first time?

WHITE: I passed it the first time and then went for the oral a few months later.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions on the oral or how it went?

WHITE: I took the test in the economics area. I remember a question about the value-added tax and what effect it would have on the U.S. economy. Luckily I had just read an editorial a few weeks before because I didn't remember it from the classroom. Another question had to do with the Soviet economy and it didn't go very well. Apparently they were trying to get me to talk about possible changes that computerization and information technology could bring to a command economy; I just couldn't pick up what they were driving at.

I remember going into the test thinking I wasn't going to pass at all, unlike the written test. I generally did well on written tests, but I didn't have much experience with oral exams and I thought I would do poorly on one as notorious as the Foreign Service exam. I went into it with a sense that it was going to be an interesting experience and good training for a future effort, so my life didn't depend on it. This attitude probably made me more relaxed and effective than I would have been if I had been desperate to pass, so somewhat to my shock I passed.

Q: Was the question raised about what your husband thought? That wouldn't be allowed today.

WHITE: I don't remember that coming up.

Q: Then so you came in the Foreign Service when?

WHITE: I entered in June 1973. It was the Watergate period and a very intense time in Washington. My then husband had worked for McGovern and so we suspected our phones might have been tapped; people were rather paranoid, some with good reason. When the Washington Post began its disclosures it was quite exciting to run to see what the morning headline would be. I remember watching the Sam Ervin hearings which enthralled me when I was home for six months with my baby daughter.

Q: What was the group in your A100 basic officer course like?

WHITE: Our class was a large one for that time, about 50 people and quite a few women. One notable person was Eleanor Constable who was coming back into the service after being forced to resign when she got married. That archaic rule had just changed and she was one of the first to come back. It was a very congenial group and some people remain good friends 30 some years later. I think the A100 process is a terrific thing because it leads to bonding that continues throughout one's career.

Q: I don't want to dwell on the gender issue, but you were there at an interesting time. Did you have the feeling that the Foreign Service was learning how to accept women in the full role and not have all the qualifications that they used to?

WHITE: As far as I could tell, none of the women I who came in about the time I did had a sense of constraint or limits. We assumed that we were professionals and that we were going to do well and be treated properly. It was a healthy way to start, but I can't, of course, speak to how all those careers developed. Several women became ambassadors; in fact the first person to make ambassador was Maryann Casey, who was ambassador in Algeria.

Q: What was your first assignment?

WHITE: My first assignment was in the East Asia Bureau in the Economic Policy Office (EAP/EP.) I didn't have any East Asia background but wanted to work on economic affairs. I began as moderately interested in Asia and ended up learning a lot about East Asian economies. That was when I first visited Japan and knew I wanted to return, as I did a few years later.

EAP/EP was a small new office that covered regional economic policy. There were three officers. It has now become considerably large because it is the office for APEC matters, but at the time it was handling transnational issues and relations with other agencies such as the Commerce Department.

Q: I imagine at that point that textiles were a major area of interest.

WHITE: This was after the major bilateral textile problems as multilateral restraints were in place by then. Issues like mushrooms, footwear and of course automobiles were starting to be problems.

Q: Was the mushroom conflict with Pennsylvania and Korea?

WHITE: Yes, Pennsylvania growers were trying to block Korean imports. That was my first experience with political pressure for specific import restraints. It was surprising for me - having studied economics in school which never mentioned politics - to see the power of a fairly small group of politicians who faced no opposition from other congressmen or senators because they might want similar treatment for products from their states.

During that time I took a couple of trips relating to interagency work to regularize commercial programs. I went to Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong. This travel was my first trip outside of the U.S. so my first passport was a diplomatic one.

Q: Did you consider language training? Were you interested in becoming an Asia specialist?

WHITE: Yes. I think it helped that on my first trip to Japan, literally my first time outside North America, an A100 classmate was in Japan and showed me around. Tokyo can be a very intimidating city but with a Japanese speaking friend I was able to do more than just go to business meetings. I liked Japan from the beginning and I think having that introduction helped.

Q: And your next tour?

WHITE: My second tour was in the Trade Office in the Economic Bureau (EB) during the Tokyo Round of multilateral trade negotiations.

Q: Did you pass through the hands of Francis Wilson? Unfortunately she has passed away. Anybody who was an economic officer of a certain era knows Francis Wilson, the civil servant who had a big influence at State. Could you talk about her a bit?

WHITE: Francis Wilson was Executive Director of the Economic Bureau for many years. She took a strong interest in people in the economic cone, junior officers as well as the more senior, and kept a careful eye on her people. It was the best kind of mentoring. She knew all the economic officers and she had a strong voice in the assignment process. With Francis on their side, people felt they were in very good hands.

Q: That shows the power and influence for the good that somebody can have within the bureaucracy.

WHITE: At the time and probably still to a certain extent the political officers thought that they were the most important people in the Service and that they were the real Foreign Service Officers. Ms. Wilson and the people who worked with her were determined that economic officers should get their just rewards, including the most senior positions. It seems that a shift did occur in which economic work was recognized as having equal importance. This was even more the case in a country like Japan, especially during the period of serious trade tensions.

Q: What were you doing in the Economic Bureau?

WHITE: I was mainly working on non-tariff negotiations in the multilateral trade round. These were issues such as quantitative restrictions, subsidies and countervailing duties, customs valuation. It was a complex interagency process. The U.S. Trade Representative's office, USTR, chaired the interagency meetings and delegations to Geneva talks

In previous trade rounds the focus had been mostly on tariffs, but by that time, developed countries tariffs had come down in most sectors, though they were still very high in textiles, agriculture and other sensitive areas. But in general tariffs weren't the big barriers anymore. The greater barriers were non-tariff restrictions, or NTMs. One example is quantitative restrictions or quotas. Even if the tariff on a good were zero, a quantitative restriction would allow only a small amount of goods.

Another major concern we had was subsidies. We were trying to develop a code to define what is or what isn't an acceptable subsidy. For example, an acceptable subsidy might be a government giving special funds to a poor part of the country to develop infrastructure, whereas an unacceptable subsidy would be to give a couple of million dollars to an industry to produce a product for export. We were trying to set up a red light, green light, yellow light system, with yellow acceptable under certain limited circumstances. There were a lot of yellow light subsidies and defining them was difficult. A third issue I worked on was customs valuation. Customs officials have a great deal of leeway to judge what tariff classification an item falls under. That could make the difference between a 2% or 20% tariff.

The Tokyo Round negotiations marked the beginning of codes that are now in place. At the time the organization was called the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT); it is now the World Trade Organization or WTO. I went to Geneva a couple of times to be involved in the multilateral trade talks and once or twice to Brussels to meet with European Union officials and to Paris for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) talks. It was a good opportunity to learn about multilateral negotiations.

Q: Did you have problems with the Congress passing subsidies while you were trying to limit them?

WHITE: That certainly has happened with agricultural subsidies. We had some pretty egregious non-tariff measure of our own, some of which were grandfathered when the GATT began, such as sugar quotas that continue today. If there were complaints from Capitol Hill, they were handled by USTR rather than State directly. Our role was somewhat subsidiary because when it came to issues like customs valuation, Treasury and Commerce had the lead. Nonetheless the State Department wanted EB to be involved as a strong presence in the talks even if we didn't have specific expertise.

Q: To get a feel for this when you say you were dealing with non-tariff items and subsidies. What does that mean? What were you doing?

WHITE: As I said, I didn't have the technical expertise that people in Customs or Commerce did, but we tried to provide policy options. If the negotiation seemed stalled, we tried to step back and look at the broader picture, suggesting an approach from a different direction.

Q: Did you get any feel for the international community? Were there natural allies and opponents while the negotiations were going on?

WHITE: It was a complex dance. At that time, with the major exceptions of agriculture and airplanes, we had a lot of concerns in common with the EU and to a certain extent with the Japanese because we were all trying to open up the developing country markets. Probably the Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians were the people who were ideologically closest to U.S. positions.

Q: Did you get involved in sheep and wool with Canadians and New Zealanders?

WHITE: No, because that was agriculture trade and that's a separate division in EB. Luckily I didn't have to do that and the bilateral problems didn't have much of an effect on the multilateral talks.

Q: Did you feel that your economic skills were improving?

WHITE: Yes, I learned a great deal about the technical side of trade. I also learned that you don't have to be a PhD economist to be a Foreign Service economic officer because so much of what we do is political economy. It isn't based on analysis and graphs and logical explanations of what will happen as variables change. Occasionally in interagency meetings a well trained economist would explain why a policy would be self-defeating or counterproductive - speaking about a protectionist action usually. People from other agencies would reply that if a politics demanded it, the economic analysis really didn't matter. Of course it is important to take into account the economic analysis but the reality is that politics are more the deciding factor in trade disputes and negotiations.

Q: In Geneva did you get a sense of the various countries and their style of trade negotiations?

WHITE: Most delegations were well prepared with their positions, which some explained at tedious length, but the horse-trading and bargaining took place behind the scenes, often involving small groups. One trial was that at that time at the GATT smoking was allowed in the meeting halls. We were sitting right behind the Mexicans and they smoked all the time. Diplomatically speaking they were fine to work with, but it must have been a welcome change for the American delegation when non-smoking policies finally reached there.

Q: Everybody forgets today when you could smoke anywhere, particularly on the airplanes.

WHITE: In a tough negotiation that went into the evening it was hard to be in a smoke filled room. People who didn't mind it really had an unfair advantage.

Q: What was your next tour?

WHITE: Then I had the FSI economics course that I found very valuable even though I'd had economics in college. It was an excellent intense review. At that time I was bidding on jobs overseas. My marriage had ended so I took into consideration living overseas with my five-year-old daughter. I was initially assigned to Embassy Brussels, which sounded fine to me. I had information about schools and apartments when they eliminated the job in April or May, quite late in the cycle. I was rather perturbed about the last minute change.

Then a job opened up in Rabat, Morocco. Because I had French I was qualified, and I was soon convinced that it was a much better assignment than living and working in Brussels. It turned out very well. From the substantive point of view I learned a great deal working in a small economic/commercial section. It was a fascinating country for travel, and a very easy place to live with a child.

Q: When were you in Morocco?

WHITE: 1978 to 1980.

Q: What was the situation in Morocco at the time?

WHITE: King Hussein was a strong ally of the U.S and generally popular with the Moroccans, who greatly respected him, but there were human rights problems. It became politically very interesting when the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was taken over in 1979 because shortly thereafter the Shah of Iran came to Rabat and spent some months there and then in Marrakech. There was concern that Morocco would be a target for the people who opposed the Shah. This was at the time when our embassies in Algeria and Pakistan were attacked.

That was the first experience most of us had had with any type of terrorist concerns, so embassies across the Middle East and North Africa were told to prepare plans. The planning was pretty basic compared to the anti-terrorist steps embassies are forced to take today. Embassy Rabat was a lovely and quite open building which at least at that time would not have been very defensible. In case of an attack we were supposed to grab our classified files, run out the back door, and put them in barrels the marines would then put gasoline on and light. It was suggested that we then go over the back fence and find our way to the British or Canadian ambassadors' houses. It was a nerve-wracking time because of our concern about what was happening elsewhere, but we didn't have any sense of real danger from the Moroccan people. We were all very worried about people in the embassy in Tehran, one of them being the security officer from Morocco who had gone there; his photo appeared right after the takeover, so we did take it personally.

Q: Yes. What was your job in Morocco?

WHITE: I was an economic/commercial officer. It was a small section with three people.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Moroccans themselves?

WHITE: As I didn't speak Arabic, my contacts were with the French speakers, so I'm not sure how representative they were of the general public. It was an urban elite. I met more working class Moroccans because my daughter had friends in the neighborhood. She made friends with the children of the maids and we occasionally went to their gatherings where we were warmly welcomed. We didn't communicate a whole lot, since most of them didn't speak much French or English, but it was still very interesting culturally to go to these little parties in the back of the big houses.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WHITE: Richard Parker was the ambassador, a respected Arabic scholar, an excellent leader, and it was a pleasure to work for and learn from him. We had the sense that the king didn't really like him because he knew too much about Arab society and had his own sources of information outside government circles.

Q: Yes, one of the things said about King Hussein is that he liked political appointees because he usually ended up co-opting them.

WHITE: Ambassador Parker was followed by Ambassador Angier Biddle Duke, a political ambassador but a good one. He had a very good presence and great contacts in Washington. I was often invited to the residence by him and Mrs. Duke because the Moroccans guests didn't bring their wives to dinner. It gave me, a relatively junior officer, a chance to meet a number of interesting people.

Another point about being a woman in Morocco is that I think my life was made easy by being a mother. Sarah and I traveled all over the country. We went to Marrakech, Fez, Chaouen, down to the desert a couple of times. I never felt threatened or harassed verbally while I think a single woman on her own might have felt uncomfortable. Because I was there with a child I was a respectable woman. My daughter adored Morocco and it had a great deal of influence on her life. Morocco is a wonderful country for traveling and the people we met were very gracious.

Q: Was there a significant expatriate community in Morocco at the time?

WHITE: There were a lot of French and a small American community. There was an American school that then went to 8th grade and many of the teachers were American women married to Moroccan men. That was another way we met Moroccan families. The American community more than doubled around 1979 because Westinghouse came in with a large number of people. They were setting up a communications project so a number of new families arrived.

Q: Had the hippie movement died off by that time?

WHITE: That was not visible in Rabat. I think probably Tangier and Marrakech got the hippies. I didn't do consular work. I feel they saw a lot more of that side of the expatriate community.

Q: Tangier seemed to get a lot of European and American hippies.

WHITE: To me, Tangier was the least attractive city in Morocco. Unfortunately a lot of Europeans and Americans came over just for a day from Spain and they got a negative impression of the country from that city. There were many aggressive men wanting to be guides and a lot of people trying to sell things so the mood was not at all typical of other cities which were welcoming without that edge of hostility.

Q: What was going on economically in Morocco at that time?

WHITE: The country had a lot of potential that wasn't really realized. Several trade missions and some high level visits were set up but American interest wasn't high. The U.S. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) was in place at that time and I worked to educate Moroccan officials and businesses about the opportunities that tariff-free treatment for certain goods might bring. The major resources were fisheries and phosphates, but not much developed while I was there. Phosphate development was complicated by the long war with the Polisario in the Sahara.

Q: What about dealing with Moroccan officials? Did you find them competent in the economic sphere, was there much to talk to them about?

WHITE: I found it somewhat frustrating because at my level of bureaucracy, my contacts were not very forthcoming. The economic counselor was able to approach the more senior people and found them more willing to discuss details and make commitments. At my level there seemed to be an uncertainty and nervousness about talking to foreigners. I think that is a problem for junior to mid-level officers in countries where people don't feel that they can speak freely. I didn't really feel like I got inside the bureaucracy nor had very good sources.

Q: It seems that Morocco is a country with good ties to France, good ties to the United States and the West and yet like many Islamic countries, they don't seem to have developed a good working infrastructure that fits into the 20th or 21st century. There isn't the kind of economic development like in East Asia. Did you look at that?

WHITE: It seemed that there was not a strong entrepreneurial spirit. The impression I got from some Moroccan business people was that they put more emphasis on knowing the right people rather than developing a plan individually. There was a fairly small business elite in Rabat, which was not the business center. Casablanca was the big commercial city and there probably was a good deal more entrepreneurship there. Morocco is a rich country agriculturally with fertile hills and fields. There was great potential, but there didn't seem to be the infrastructure to support trade. For example, we saw huge piles of melons by the road for sale. All the melons ripened at the same time and they'd be sold for just about nothing. If they could have been shipped to Europe there would have been a lot of money for the farmers and a processing industry might have developed.

Q: What did you do in '80?

WHITE: That's when I bid on Japan. Thanks in part to my first tour in the East Asia Bureau I was known to people there and assigned to the economic section in Tokyo via two years of language training.

Q: Let's talk a bit about language training. How did you find it?

WHITE: I lack the language gene, so it was difficult. I worked very hard at it and I got my 3/3 in Japanese, but it was constant work. I was at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) at Rosslyn for a year, which was not an attractive place physically. We were in a high rise and in small airless rooms doing fairly stressful work, though I enjoyed the teachers and my fellow classmates. The FSI campus at Arlington Hall is a great improvement and much more pleasant surroundings for students.

Then I went to Yokohama, a pleasant environment. Yokohama is a great city as an introduction to Japan. It is a large city, but seems much more relaxed and green compared to nearby Tokyo. My classmates were interesting because the Foreign Service Institute at that time also had Canadian, Australian and New Zealand officials, which made for a nice mix. It was a good combination of backgrounds there, and gave us a wider circle of friends and contacts when we moved on to Tokyo. We also did field trips and travel, so it was a good year.

Q: As you learned the language was the cultural and social structure part of what you learned?

WHITE: It was. I don't remember specifically what I learned in area studies, which is ironic because I'm now teaching the Japan Area Studies class at FSI, but students imbibed a sense of culture and social structure as they learned the language. Japanese is a very hierarchical language and words and structure reflect the way people interact. Women have a certain way of talking that is very distinct from men's tones and vocabulary. You talk one way to your seniors and one way to your subordinates. That is really the most difficult part of Japanese. You're not learning one language; you have to at least be able to understand quite a range of different manners of speech. We were taught basic, standard speech, such as radio announcers would use, but it was always difficult to understand when listening to TV or movies when people weren't speaking standard Japanese or were talking in what might be considered slang.

Q: It seems that a lot of Japanese women seem to speak in a higher tone than necessary.

WHITE: Yes, it is considered a polite feminine form of speech.

Q: How did they teach foreign women?

WHITE: The FSI teachers are careful to teach the students, male or female, to speak a standard neutral Japanese. All the teachers in Washington were women, so they were very careful not to give the male students certain mannerisms or speech patterns that would be considered feminine. Neutral speech from a foreigner is pretty much what the Japanese would expect. They don't expect most foreigners to make the speech distinctions Japanese do.

Q: How about the writing system? It is like the Chinese, isn't it?

WHITE: There are two different alphabets based on syllables, hiragana and katakana, the latter used for foreign worlds. There are also thousands of kanji which are the Chinese characters. We were taught to read kanji. It was pure memorization so students focused on their substantive areas and learned the kanji for technical words. I was trained to read economic and trade articles and was able to get a 3/3 reading economic articles, but had I been given an article about missile defense, I wouldn't have been able to read it at all.

Q: When in Yokohama, were you able to use your Japanese?

WHITE: That was the great benefit of living and studying in Japan. From the beginning we were living in Japanese neighborhoods, talking to the families, and shopping in little stores. There were also "conversation ladies," who came as volunteers to chat with the students and get together for tea and casual conversation. The Japanese really appreciate people trying to speak the language and praise any effort. It is a positive atmosphere for learning.

Q.You went to Embassy Tokyo in 1982?

WHITE: Yes, in June 1982, and I stayed four more years in Japan. Former Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield was the ambassador, one of our longest serving ambassadors who served under both Republicans and Democrats. He was greatly respected by everyone, a gentleman and a man of great integrity. Don Oberdorfer wrote a good biography of him a few years ago.

I was a mid-level officer in the economic section and I had a double portfolio. The more demanding part was transportation. At that time, Japan's export of automobiles was the major trade problem with the U.S., a very political issue. Aviation negotiations occupied a great deal of my time and we saw a lot of changes in the aviation relationship during that period. I also followed shipping.

The other half of the portfolio was reporting on Japan's relationship with the communist countries. I reported on their trade with China, with the Soviet Union and handled the COCOM issue, which related to controls on the export of strategic materials.

Q.Was Japanese essential for your work?

WHITE: Probably not essential. Most of the people I worked with in the Foreign Ministry and in MITI, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, spoke English. The Ministry of Transportation people who were my other main contacts were mixed in terms of language. The people in the International Division spoke English but with some of the more technical bureaus we did things in Japanese. My Japanese was adequate, but I must admit that it never reached a level of real fluency where I could feel comfortable doing a negotiation without a Foreign Service National (FSN) to back me up.

Q: I know the feeling. In the early 1980's, how did you find being a woman dealing with the Japanese? Was it a problem or were you just the 800 lb. gorilla representing the United States and it didn't make any difference?

WHITE: I think it didn't make much difference. It was very different from how I would have been treated had I been a Japanese woman. I was an American and therefore dealt with as an American, and also had the advantage of being an American diplomat. I think an American businesswoman or reporter would not have had as easy access as I did, but they had to deal with me on government to government issues. I also think that for some Japanese it was a novelty to be sitting across the table from a woman. Speaking some Japanese helped, too.

Q: On that subject, I don't know how it worked for embassy people, but business people often had to go out drinking in the evenings when the business was really done. Was this the case?

WHITE: Certainly drinking after work hours is a major part of the Japanese business lifestyle and also to a certain extent the government official's lifestyle. It is considered important to cement business ties at a social level. I occasionally went out to dinner with people and went to a lot of receptions but didn't go often to smoky bars. Not too many embassy people did. Those who spoke Japanese very well, particularly those who had lived in Japan earlier as students, went out more with the Japanese. People in the political section, especially those following the political parties, worked to make that sort of social connection. Most people, especially those with families, worked long enough hours and had to go to enough official functions that we limited the bar scene to what was really necessary.

Q: Let's take the issues one at a time. On the transportation side, what was the car situation at that point?

WHITE: That was the time when Japanese exports were really overwhelming GM, Ford and Chrysler. To a certain degree it was a problem of American quality and fuel efficiency. People had noticed that relatively inexpensive Toyotas or Hondas tended to last and, being smaller, get better mileage. To the American automakers' credit, they did restructure and started turning out much better products, but initially the reaction was political. Given the trade deficit, it was easy to generate protectionist Buy America campaigns and Congressional pressure on the Japanese. Congress got involved with threats of legislation and quotas; also the Super 301 amendment to the Trade Act was passed. That was aimed at "unfair" trade practices of any country, but mainly was aimed at Japan. Because the auto industry is such a major part of the U.S. economy, autos were the prime target.

It was also a problem because very few American autos were exported to Japan. There were a number of reasons for that. One was that U.S. autos tended to be quite big and gas guzzling and weren't practical in a Japanese city. Therefore most of the U.S. automakers hadn't made much of an effort to meet Japan's standards. For example, American steering wheels were on the wrong side for Japanese roads, but American companies didn't make a right hand drive model.

Foreign companies had a very hard time getting into distribution networks. There were also some strange and complicated technical issues on the Japanese side. You had to have fold down mirrors and special headlights. You had to have special shields for catalytic converters. Due to the strict standards, it was very expensive, about $1000, for every American car that came to Japan to be reconstituted, ostensibly for safety reasons. I worked to get more American cars into Japan. On my home leave I spent a good deal of time in Detroit visiting the testing facilities of the major American companies. I wanted to see the emphasis they put on safety in order to argue authoritatively that the U.S. safety tests should be accepted. The Japanese were saying they needed to be done all over again in Japan. What eventually developed was a program that allowed small quantities, e.g. 1,000 cars, to come in without having to go through all the tests and changes. It was a special exception made for political purposes.

As to exports to the U.S., a "voluntary" restraint agreement (VRA) was put in place in 1981 whereby a set number of cars was to be exported. I believe it was 186,000 cars a year. That left the Japanese government to decide who got the quotas, which meant they looked at past export records. This favored Toyota and Nissan. Honda, which was late in entering the U.S. markets, got a much smaller quota so there was a lot of political concern within Japan about how to allocate the 186,000 among their big three and smaller companies.

The irony is that the VRA gave U.S. companies breathing room to restructure, but it also really strengthened Japanese companies. Protectionist pressure often has such negative results. Extra profit went to the Japanese companies as Toyotas, for example, were in short supply in the U.S. Toyota dealers could ask for premium payments above the list price, so the Japanese ended up shipping their more expensive models because they could only ship a certain number. Profits in the American market gave them large capital reserves.

Q: Were Americans and Japanese looking at building Japanese cars in the United States? My wife has a 2001 Toyota with a sticker saying 60% was built in the United States. Was this a factor?

WHITE: Major Japanese investment in the U.S. developed during that time period. From the mid-1980s there was a migration of auto plants to the U.S. Obviously, since they couldn't ship all the finished cars they could sell, they realized that they could assemble cars in the U.S. and they would be U.S. cars not subject to the VRA. That caused political controversy too and at least initially the critics were right that this was not real U.S. production. Companies were sending over the most expensive, high tech parts like the engines and just having them put into car frames by Americans, which wasn't doing a lot for American employment. Because of the pressure for more American content, they gradually increased parts production in the U.S. In many cases, however, the parts suppliers were Japanese transplants as well, part of the keiretsu or inter-connected company network. That caused many complaints as well. Still, Americans got more jobs and many states benefited. Local content is now quite high.

Q: Were they talking to you or the embassy on this subject?

WHITE: The U.S. government encouraged foreign investment in the U.S., particularly the Commerce Department and the Commercial Section at the Embassy. The purpose was to increase employment opportunities for Americans. The Embassy was helpful to a lot of state governments that opened trade offices in Tokyo. Those trade offices, which had been to encourage Japanese to purchase their exports, became more active as investment promotion offices. Many states offered good tax benefits to encourage companies to locate there. That worked well for places like Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama, though not much investment went to the traditional auto-producing - and unionized - states like Michigan and Ohio.

As more Japanese investment went in, and there began to be "buying of America" concerns, the Japanese were clever enough to seek good labor relations, join in community activities, contribute heavily to local charities. Now they are a real presence in the U.S. and that has a political impact. Their employees are voters, and congressmen see the benefits of foreign investment. If someone proposed protectionist action against Toyota, for example, you'd see tens of thousands of Toyota employees in the U.S. objecting. Toyota is a good case of community involvement, as they now have plants in a number of states. One of their good programs is to send high school teachers to Japan for a month each year, at first from the states where they had plants but now from all over, I think. Many of these teachers have never been out of the country before and their students have little international exposure. They come back and talk about Japan to their students and to their communities and it makes a difference.

Q: Was there a cultural movement spurred by industry?

WHITE: It was fairly calculating, e.g. we're going to be facing political pressures for a long time, so let's find a way to be in the U.S. market and develop a countervailing force against protectionism in the Congress. Many excellent exchange programs have been developed, in part due to a political motivation to gain greater American understanding of and sympathy for Japan. Jobs were key, but education and cultural exchanges were and are very valuable whatever the initial motivation.

Q: Did automobile manufacturers and others in Japan understand the American market and the political system or was it a learning process?

WHITE: They got a lot more sophisticated in the 1980s. Japanese corporations put a lot more money into hiring Americans. That led to domestic criticism of K Street lobbyists hired for their political connections. They also hired people to do analysis and publish studies, including economic work, and it was not usually biased in favor of the Japanese. But nonetheless it was an ugly period due to the trade tensions. At one point several congressmen took sledgehammers and destroyed a Japanese automobile on Capitol Hill in full view of the cameras. That was replayed many times on Japanese TV and Japanese still talk of it today. There was an even uglier incident when some drunken unemployed autoworkers beat to death a Chinese American because they thought he was Japanese.

Q: I remember that. That was just terrible. .

WHITE: That of course brought a lot of memories of the discrimination in World War II when the Japanese Americans were put in interment camps.

Q: And the Japanese exclusion at the turn of the century.

WHITE: That's right. So a lot of Japanese at first felt defensive, then resentful, about why they were hated when they saw themselves as just working hard and making good products. In the U.S. there were articles and books with the theme that we won the war, but the Japanese really won in the long run with their economic dominance.

On a more thoughtful note, writers in the revisionist school of political economy, led by people like James Fallows and Clyde Prestowitz, were writing books saying that Japan could not be treated as a normal nation in terms of trade policy. The theory was that countries like the U.S. and the EU worked within in the GATT rules, but Japan, due to the structure of its business-government relationships, simply operated outside the rules. The answer therefore had to be managed trade in which there would be quotas and arranged markets on both sides. So it was good policy to limit the Japanese to 186,000 cars a year in the U.S. market and require the Japanese to import 10% of semi-conductors from foreign markets. That was a very strong trend throughout the '80s. The pressure diminished in the '90s when it turned out that the Japanese system was not as infallible and ready to take over the world as had been feared; also the Japanese vigorously resisted pressure for more specific numbers.

Another revisionist concern was that that because Japanese companies' source of capital and capital flows were different from ours, the Japanese companies did not have to worry about profits. They could just concentrate on market share. That was true, and it helped them grow for many years, but it wasn't sustainable. In the '90s it turned out that because they hadn't had to worry about profits they made a lot of unprofitable investments that then came home to roost and led to a decade of stagnation.

Q: There was no basic accountability.

WHITE: Yes. Because banks rather than the stock market were the source of capital, and because of close keiretsu ties between banks and corporations, you didn't have a real cost of capital. Therefore there was no outside demand that required it to be used in an efficient way.

Q: During the '80s there were books about how the U.S. should copy the Japanese system. In many ways, we did with better quality control, as in automobiles, which have changed considerably.

WHITE: There was a positive interest in quality control. Also some firms gave workers more responsibility for pointing out areas of concern or for improvement, and the ability to stop the assembly line if something was going wrong. That was a lesson from Japanese factories.

Q: What about your relationship with your Japanese counterparts? This was a very difficult time because of the anti-Japanese feeling fostered by exactly what you were dealing with, particularly the automobile issue. Did you find this reflected in dealing with your Japanese counterparts?

WHITE: On an individual basis there was no hostility. There was a professionalism, a sense that regardless of what our governments or politicians were saying, and certainly regardless of what the press was saying, we had to work together to solve the problems. It helped that Ambassador Mansfield was well respected by the Japanese and was considered very even-handed. That got him into trouble back in the U.S., of course, because any ambassador who seems sympathetic to the host country is considered to have gone over to the enemy. But in fact while trying to explain to Americans where the Japanese were coming from and why they took certain positions, he still pressured them hard for market opening actions.

The economic section handled a lot of delegations, usually led by USTR, sometimes by the Commerce Department and there were long difficult negotiations. But there was no animosity among the people involved. Americans from these other agencies often were fairly new to work with the Japanese, but over the years developed into very savvy negotiators who really understood the system.

Q: I understand from a person from the Commerce Department I interviewed that the Foreign Service National (FSN) Japanese staff was invaluable during negotiations in being able to point out flaws and inaccuracies on the Japanese side.

WHITE: I think most embassies have extraordinary FSNs and benefit greatly from their knowledge. At that time in Embassy Tokyo, there was a transitional period because the first generation that had been hired after the war was retiring. They had started working in the '50s or early '60s and were a great source of advice. As you noted, they played a big role from the back row as they could remember what had happened in previous talks. Short tour Americans were at a disadvantage. The Japanese brought huge delegations into the room. They would have 10 or 12 people at the table and 25 young people behind. The young people were all taking notes as part of their training. This meant that they had very good records and could go back and say something like, "In 1978 the deputy assistant secretary said X, which contradicts what you are saying now." We didn't always know the background because we changed so much. The more senior Japanese staff at the embassy were a big help there; I'm not sure they were always invited to participate, but they should have been in the room. Also, as other agency personnel don't change as much, a strong cadre of American government experts has developed over the last 20 or 30 years.

Q: What about bureaucratic practices designed to stifle imports into Japan?

WHITE: Japanese bureaucrats used the excuse of safety regulations to make things very difficult. That was certainly true in the automobile case. Regulations on things like the size or brightness of headlights had unnecessarily narrow limits, things were obscure, and the bureaucrats were totally rigid about things. But there were also misunderstandings. There was one possible non-tariff barrier that people thought was an outrage until they found out the whole story. Parking lots were refusing to allow foreign cars into their lots. The assumption was that the Japanese had such deep anti-foreign car feeling that they wouldn't let American cars be parked. It turned out that the yakuza, the Japanese gangsters, were among the biggest consumers of black Cadillacs. That was a sign of gangster prosperity. Not many other people would buy them for that reason. The parking lot attendants said "no foreign cars" because they were terrified that a Cadillac would get scratched and they'd have their kneecaps broken. You do have to look below the surface sometimes.

Q: Did we look at retaliation?

WHITE: We threatened more than we acted. A number of trade cases under Section 301 of the Trade Act were brought. The interagency group considered them, tried to negotiate and drew up a list of items for retaliation, but very few of them got to the retaliation stage. It was actually a failure if we reached the retaliatory stage, for it meant that the U.S. hadn't been able to gain the trade liberalization we sought. It was better to make a deal.

Regarding import procedures, another issue I worked on related to customs procedures. Japan has a terribly inefficient airport, Narita Airport, which serves Tokyo. It was politically controversial from the time it was built because the government highhandedly seized land of farmers to build the airport. It was intimated that some of the land had been bought up by politicians' friends so they ended up making a lot of money. A certain number of farmers refused to move and it became a focus of violent radicalism.

Q: I remember seeing farmers out on the runway and that sort of thing.

WHITE: Yes. Several guards were killed in the early days of fighting. Even today the airport is ringed with heavy security. The bilateral complaints related to the fact that once the airport was built, the continuing conflict meant they couldn't expand it for many years to add a needed second runway, which seriously limited foreign carriers who wanted to expand into a growing market.

Narita also had a very inefficient customs process for goods clearance. Goods had to be trucked to another facility 20 or 30 miles away which wasn't too bad if you weren't dealing with something that was perishable or needed fast clearance. However the U.S. wanted get efficient processing on our exports of agricultural products, especially fruit. Apples, cherries, etc. faced all kinds of phytosanitary requirements but slow customs procedures were equally obstructionist.

It became even more difficult when organizations like FedEx started what was new at the time, an overnight small package delivery service. The shipments would get quickly to Japan, but once on the ground the customs clearance was really a hindrance. The customs officials worked basically 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM so for overnight shipments the timing was all wrong. American flights arrived in the late afternoon in Tokyo. We had constant battles to get the Japanese to hire more people, extend their hours, have more facilities on site at the airport, and get the stuff through the clearance process. That's the sort of bureaucratic problem that applied on the surface to domestic and foreign interests but had a more negative effect on American operations.

Q: Moving to the other part of the transportation portfolio, what about railroads? Were we doing much with railroad products?

WHITE: It wasn't a question of import/export with railways. We were interested in the technology and occasionally the Embassy would handle visitors coming to look at the Shinkansen, the bullet train, which was at that time the highest speed rail in the world. They were also starting to experiment with a magnetic levitation train in southern Kyushu. So this was an area of cooperation, not conflict.

A different problem in the transportation area related to road transport. One non-tariff barrier that I worked on a good deal was a limit on high cube cargo containers. The major American shipping lines, American President Lines (APL) and Sealand, used a certain container that was the routine size of containers all over the world. However it was about a foot and a half too high according to Japanese regulations, so these companies went to great expense in taking cargo out of the containers that came off the ships and putting it into smaller containers so that they could be shipped on the Japanese roads.

Q: Were they worried about high cube containers hitting low bridges?

WHITE: That's what they said, but as I kept pointing out, the shipping companies would obviously plan and take safe routes. It wasn't in their interest to run into low bridges, after all. The bureaucrats were simply defending the status quo- which, in this case, was negatively affecting Japanese companies as well.

On this issue, I worked a lot with the National Police Agency, which was one of the more insular agencies, at least on the road transport side (as opposed to cooperation on criminal issues) as they didn't generally deal with international issues. One of the most undiplomatic things I ever did was when a police officer said to me, "We can't have these high cube containers because Japan is a small country." I laughed out loud. Then I tried to recover by pointing out that Hong Kong, which was considerably smaller, had managed to arrange their regulations to accommodate these containers. We finally succeeded in getting them to allow the taller containers. Not surprisingly, that was in part because Japanese companies were switching to these larger size containers and put pressure on as well, probably through political channels. Of course then the containers got even larger and they asked for double container loads and things, but as that was after my time I don't know how it stands now.

Q: Some of these were American problems, but they weren't uniquely American problems. You had Europeans exporting, too. Was there a unified approach or it was everybody for themselves?

WHITE: We didn't usually coordinate on specific actions but we did have contact and share information. I called on my European counterparts and we were close to the British and Canadians in particular. Other countries saw the U.S. as the country with the most leverage. They were helpful and told us what they were doing, but the attitude was more to let us go ahead while they went in later and supported us. They knew that the Japanese were more likely to listen to us because of the size of the U.S. market.

Q: Were you undercut by countries caving in to the Japanese regulations in order to gain advantage over American exports?

WHITE: I don't remember any specific incidents of that. The Europeans were doing better than we were in exporting automobiles, particularly the Germans. It was because Mercedes had a good reputation and Volkswagens were popular because they were cute and small. Right hand drive and good gas mileage, along with a reputation for quality, were key. But the numbers for imports were nothing like the Japanese exports to Europe. That in turn was far less than exports to the U.S. I believe that the Japanese exports to Europe were limited by EU import restraints, both standards and quotas. They weren't getting the overwhelming market penetration the U.S. was. In fact back in Washington there was a three pronged effort where we tried to get the Europeans to get rid of their protectionist legislation so that some of the flow would be diverted to Europe, taking some of the pressure off the U.S. as the only big open market. The other two prongs were working to get more U.S. cars exported and the Voluntary Restraint Agreement.

Q: On the aviation side you mentioned the airport customs clearance problem. Were there any other aviation issues?

WHITE: This was a major issue and along with autos took most of my time. There had been a treaty in the early '50s that was very rigid, as most bilateral aviation treaties were at that time. Certain airlines were allowed in a market with a set number of flights and prices were controlled. The domestic aviation market had also been heavily regulated, but in the '80s deregulation in the U.S. was well underway and companies wanted more flexibility in international markets.

The American carriers in the market were Pan Am, Northwest, and Flying Tigers. Continental had a small route that went between Japan and Saipan that carried mostly tourists and honeymooners. On the Japanese side the carrier was Japan Air Lines (JAL.) The Japanese felt that they were disadvantaged because they had only one airline in the market. That happened because at the time of the treaty they had only one international airline, which was heavily government financed. There was a lot of pressure on both sides from other airlines that wanted to get into the lucrative trans-Pacific market.

A new round of talks began when the Japanese asked for landing rights for Nippon Cargo Air (NCA), which was a new cargo airline that was a subsidiary of All Nippon Airways (ANA.) ANA is a large domestic airline in Japan while JAL had always been the international carrier. ANA had aspirations to become a bigger player in the international field, but some years before they had been slowed down by the Lockheed scandal which involved Prime Minister Tanaka. It involved kickbacks for buying Lockheed planes for ANA. So for a while they were quiet and made no effort to expand into American markets.

But in the mid-'80s ANA wanted to get involved and asked for landing rights for NCA. They were looking at flying high-tech components as well as finished exports to the American market, with rights to Chicago a major part of their plan. The USG refused, though strictly speaking the treaty allowed the new rights. But U.S. airlines had been seeking more rights both for existing carriers to increase their flights and for new carriers. They saw no other leverage than to refuse what was in fact a legitimate Japanese request. In the meantime NCA had two huge Boeing jumbo cargo jets sitting on the runway losing a lot of money, so the Japanese were furious and we began a long round of negotiations.

The talks were led by State Department and Department of Transportation (DOT), as was the pattern, but unlike most aviation talks, USTR and Commerce also got involved. American companies opposed to NCA framed the question as example of Japan, Inc. because NCA was associated with ANA and also because we'd had all the other problems with customs clearance, high cube containers, etc. that related to cargo operations. The talks became highly political on both sides.

Q: Using the term Japan, Inc. was a shorthand term of saying both the government and business were very closely entwined.

WHITE: Yes, The argument was that ANA/NCA was a conglomerate that was going to overwhelm the smaller American players like Flying Tigers, the cargo airline. Needless to say Flying Tigers was very eager to keep out another cargo carrier. Pan Am and Northwest were combination carriers, with passengers but also large cargo operations, so they liked the status quo. They had a nice market because it was a protected market share, a pie of a certain size and with all the same players year after year.

The new arrangement was not completely open skies, not a completely deregulated system. Conflict continued with the Japanese about the number of slots and the timing of the arrivals at airports because, as noted earlier, Narita Airport was unable to expand as much as it should. Nonetheless the deal brought a lot more capacity in the market and really helped the consumer. Prices went down and the volume of passenger traffic went up.

Q: Was Ambassador Mansfield called in from time to time to weigh in?

WHITE: Yes, having been a senator he was sensitive to the politics and careful to ensure that all the American companies got a fair hearing. During the many months of the aviation talks he received a lot of the American companies who had very divergent views. Some were very eager to get the market open so that newcomers could come in, while the incumbent carriers were arguing against a deal. It's hard not to take sides in something like that because either you support the ones in the market or you don't. The general inclination of economists is to support a freer market but that can be difficult to say for political reasons.

The Japanese companies also made calls and gave their point of view. Sometimes he pushed them to consider alternative scenarios. I remember one interesting meeting with the NCA officials who were just wringing their hands and practically in tears at that point because they were losing so much money with their planes grounded without landing rights. You've probably already heard about how Mike Mansfield would make coffee for his guests himself. It was instant coffee and he made it in a little alcove and refused help from his staff. That stunned Japanese visitors because they always had a young office lady to do that, but here was Ambassador Mansfield bringing them coffee himself. At this meeting the NCA officials gave a 10 minute explanation about why NCA should be allowed in the market, cited the treaty and said it really wasn't fair. When they finished the ambassador took his pipe out of his mouth and said, "I agree." That's all he said. They didn't know what to say, so they basically repeated their points again. I thought that was classic Mike Mansfield.

Q: Moving to the controls, the Cold War was still going on with China and the Soviet Union. What were some of the issues that you got involved in?

WHITE: There was a lot of concern about dual use items, high tech equipment that could be going to the Soviet Union or other countries for ostensibly legitimate purposes but that could be diverted to military use. The allied nations' Coordinating Committee - COCOM - in Paris kept a specific list of sensitive items. There were constant arguments among the developed Western nations about which items should be on the list and which were legitimate for shipment. Many of the decisions were made on a case by case basis.

Japan got a lot of attention because Japan made computers, high tech ceramics, electronics and other sophisticated components, more so than most countries. Partly because of the general anti-Japan feeling in Washington, many people believed that Japanese companies were unscrupulous and selling items under the table, through third countries, with questionable invoices, etc. There probably was a certain amount of that going on, as other countries' companies did as well. The question was how you found out about it. There were certainly a lot of things being shipped to third countries and then on to the Soviet Union, maybe with the knowledge of originating companies while some may have shipped goods in good faith. We quietly shared information on questionable cases with Japanese government officials.

Q: A case that got a lot of attention involved Toshiba.

WHITE: Yes, there were apparently deliberate shipments of goods that allowed the Soviets to create very quiet submarines. It happened a year or two after I left in 1987 or '88, so didn't deal with that one, but that was a classic case and Americans were justifiably very angry that a Japanese company would put profit over security, especially given that we had our troops defending Japan. I don't remember what the sanctions were, but the Japanese government cracked down harder because of that case. It is still remembered here and still resented.

Q: In many ways it sounds like the economic side was a driving engine in the Japanese American relations during this period.

WHITE: I think it was. It certainly was what got the most attention. Of course at this time there was a strong security relationship and good political ties. This was during the Reagan years and Reagan developed a good rapport with Prime Minister Nakasone. Nakasone was unusual in several ways. First he lasted more than a year or two. A lot of American presidents have mediocre relations with the Japanese prime minister because it's a different one every time they meet. The Ron-Yasu relationship developed into a strong personal bond during the period, so the political ties were quite good. And Nakasone was a strong personality who made an impression on the American public. This is unusual as many Japanese politicians aren't well known here.

Q: Were there the economic summits at the time you were there? They're called the G-8 now.

WHITE: It was the G-7 at that time. One year it was in Tokyo and it very interesting to observe.

Q: From your perspective how effective were the summits? Were they trying to settle some problems or was it just people talking and getting together?

WHITE: For the embassy it was a time for everybody to be involved in one way or another, being a control officer for this site or that site, taking care of the visitors of all levels. In terms of the bilateral economic problems handled by the Embassy, I don't think much was accomplished. There were bilaterals and each side had a laundry list of issues and talking points. A lot more emphasis was put on the Treasury Department's concerns and the multilateral issues.

Q: How did it work with the Department of Commerce which had its own Foreign Service? Were they a player in major negotiations or were they really looking for commercial opportunities? How did you work with them?

WHITE: The Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) people worked on both negotiations and commercial opportunities. The commercial section and economic section were both large sections in the embassy and also each had a number of Foreign Service Nationals. Their main focus was to help specific companies get into the market, but they were also involved, though to a lesser extent than the economic section, in policy questions. Things could have gotten complicated if the personalities in the two sections had clashed, but luckily the two sections saw their roles as complementary so we didn't have problems. In negotiations like automobiles the commercial officer was part of the delegation. While the economic section focused on policy, the commercial section focused on practical aspects and could bring evidence of specific problems that business people had encountered when they tried to get in the market.

Q: During this time Japan was pretty expensive to live in wasn't it?

WHITE: Yes, when I arrived there in '81 to go to language school I think the yen was about 240 to the dollar, but after the Plaza Accords the rate went up and down so there was a lot of variation. Almost everyone in the embassy lived on a compound, which was newly constructed at that time. It was very convenient because one could walk to work in 10 or 15 minutes. You didn't have housing or utility costs to worry about. There was a small store there that got goods from the commissaries on the military bases, fresh milk once a week, that sort of thing. Basic canned goods, cereal, were available. People with large families or who did a lot of entertaining drove out to Yokota Air Base or Yokosuka Naval Base to do their shopping although I only did that a few times.

Travel was expensive, unfortunately, because people with bigger families couldn't afford to get on the train and go to Kyoto or Hokkaido or other parts of Japan. Train fares were high as was lodging unless you went really low scale. Nonetheless we tried to visit various areas and get out of Tokyo as much as possible. Tokyo is a very concrete city and every three months or so you needed to get out and see some greenery. My daughter's school went on ski trips to the Japan Alps and she and I traveled a good deal by air, train, bus, ferry, etc. We especially enjoyed our trips to Kyushu.

Q: You left there in '86?

WHITE: Yes. I was then fortunate to be given a year of mid-career training, and got a Masters in Public Administration at the Kennedy School at Harvard. It was an excellent year, as I took about half my courses at the Kennedy School on public policy issues and half in the college taking courses relating to Japan. I had several small graduate level seminars with excellent teachers like Ezra Vogel and Ronald Dore. My classmates at the Kennedy School were also very interesting as they were all mid-career people, mostly in their 30s, with a variety of experience in federal, state and local government, non-profits, and international affairs. And it was great to live in Cambridge with its wide range of cultural and intellectual activities. I graduated in June, 1987 and returned to Washington.

Q: Where did you go next?

WHITE: I returned to the Economic Bureau to be deputy division chief of the Office of Trade Agreements, which was handling bilateral trade issues. This assignment was from 1987 to 1989.

Q: Did you see a change in the American-Japanese relationship? Was there still anti-Japanese feeling in the political arena?

WHITE: Yes, that sentiment continued. I wasn't specifically working on Japan then because it was in the Economic Bureau and our responsibilities covered many countries. One of my roles was to be the State representative on the 30l Committee, named after section 301 of the Trade Act. That section, as mentioned earlier, called for retaliation against "unfair trade practices" of other countries and Japan was often cited. Usually the cases involved firms making claims of unfair trade practices they met when trying to export to another country. They presented evidence of illegal barriers and asked for sanctions against that country.

There were a number of complaints, one of the largest being a Boeing complaint against European subsidies to Airbus. Some cases were brought against developing countries but those were a minority. Several large and visible cases were brought against Japan, and anti-Japanese feeling on trade continued through the early '90s at a pretty intense level. But even when the U.S. was ready to retaliate, it proved difficult to find a retaliation package that didn't also hurt domestic interests. The idea was to raise U.S. tariffs on items important only to the target country. For example, the Commerce Department would draw up a list of potential items for retaliation that might have 200 items, with the target country the main supplier. The committee would think it would be easy to reach $40 million, $40 million being the assumed damages targeted for this market. There would be a notice in the Federal Register and a hearing would be held. People would come in from all over the country and ask that a specific product be left off because it was a necessary component, it was the core of their business or for various other reasons. It was usually the case that only the business bringing the case was for action, while dozens of others would be against.

So while it looked easy to retaliate, the deep economic ties between countries made it hard to find items without a negative impact on some U.S. interests. In fact people criticized the State Department saying State always blocked action against Japan because we were too concerned with preserving the political and security relationship. In reality it was hard to take action against Japan without hurting some U.S. interests. I never heard State people make the political/security argument to block action other agencies were determined to take in a trade case.

Q: While you were working in the trade office was there concern about the European Union becoming a closed market for the United States?

WHITE: No, that the relationship was very important with huge trade and investment flows in both directions, though there were specific complaints on both sides. Most trade officials felt that the European Union was a group we could work with in trade negotiations in Geneva on most issues.

There were several significant problems; one that my office worked on was the Airbus subsidy issue, in which Boeing claimed that the European government subsidies to the corporation were unfair and illegal. There clearly were loans for various types of development and one of the questions was whether Airbus was ever expected to pay them back - if they were going to be written off, they were subsidies. There were talks going on then - and they continue - trying to define an acceptable level of development subsidies. The Europeans make the counterclaim that Boeing gets indirect subsidies from military research on aviation that improves commercial development.

The other big problem with the EU was agricultural issues, though there is another office in the Economic Bureau that handles agriculture. Subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy were a big problem, as they are today. There were other issues, e.g. they wouldn't allow the import of U.S. beef because of the hormones in the beef. That issue went to a GATT tribunal and the U.S. won, but they fought the verdict and didn't let American beef in.

Q: Were there complaints about our own protection of agricultural products?

WHITE: Yes, many countries complained. For example, our sugar policy is very protectionist. We had to argue that these existing quotas were grandfathered in when we signed the GATT which is technically correct. The fact that they're unfair and self-defeating for all sorts of reasons doesn't carry much weight against the political power of the agriculture lobbies, here and in other places like the EU and Japan.

Q: Were there any issues during this time that you dealt with relating to other countries?

WHITE: We were starting to look harder at developing countries' policies. There were a few complaints against India and Mexico, but the bulk of the issues were with the developed countries.

Q: One of the issues raised at a recent G-8 meeting concerned poverty in Africa, with people saying we have closed markets to African products such as cotton.

WHITE: Open markets for cotton and sugar certainly could make a big difference to developing countries. More liberal agricultural trade policies on the part of developed countries would clearly be more important to developing countries than aid packages.

Q: Was that an issue we looking at that at the time?

WHITE: Yes, particularly due to pressure from Latin American countries arguing that that if we opened up our markets they could grow much faster. There wasn't much of a lobby in the U.S. that was arguing for liberalization. There was an intellectual position that we should be liberalizing for the benefit of the consumer and for international relations reasons, but as there is today there was a resistance to more open markets.

Q: And your next position?

WHITE: In 1989 I became special assistant to the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs Richard McCormack. I was handling his Asia portfolio. Japan took most of my time. McCormack was one of the principals in the Structural Impediments Initiative (SII) talks. The talks were set up to look at six broad areas of the Japanese economy that the U.S. felt should change in order to create a more open economy. The concept was that sector specific negotiations, e.g. focusing on autos or semiconductors, were not getting to the root of the problems with the Japanese system.

When presented with this idea, the Japanese agreed to talks but said they had to be reciprocal. They wanted to raise problem areas in our economy so that it would be a balanced negotiation. They complained about the U.S. budget deficit, for example, which was sucking imports into our economy and creating the trade deficit, in their view. We complained about issues like their interlocking business ties and low public spending. It was a very wide-ranging negotiation and people from Treasury, Commerce, USTR, the Office of Management and Budget, the Justice Department and State got involved. The USG officials did serious papers, looked a lot at the academic studies on the Japanese market and came up with six areas that we wanted to focus on.

One of them was Japan's budget restraint. The idea was that they needed to loosen up and put more money into government funding which would get the economy growing faster and thereby encourage imports. Land use policy was another issue. They had a lot of taxation policies that kept agricultural land taxes very low because of the traditional view of the Japanese as rice farmers. It resulted in unproductive uses of land. The concept was that if you could free up suburban land there'd be more growth, more building, and more imports would be generated.

A third area was the distribution system and that's the one I ended up working on for a number of years. The problem was that the small shopkeepers, the mom and pop stores had an enormous stranglehold on the ability of larger stores to open. Toys-R-Us became poster child for that as they were trying to get into the market. They and other big stores, domestic and foreign, were blocked by the Large Scale Retail Store Law that prevented large stores from opening if anybody in the neighborhood objected to it.

Keiretsu issues were another major problem. Keiretsu are large business and corporate groups that have interlocking ties with one another. They held each other's stock, which kept outsiders out, and they didn't buy intermediate goods on price grounds but bought from their related companies. That prevented new suppliers from getting in the market. Anti-trust issues were taken up seriously for the first time and the Justice Department got very much involved in urging the Japanese to strengthen their enforcement of laws that were on the books but pretty much ignored.

Working groups were set up at a fairly high level for each of these issues and several under secretaries took the lead. Deputy USTR Linn Williams, Under Secretary McCormack and Treasury Under Secretary Zoellick were the leads. Treasury Deputy Assistant Secretary Bob Fauver was a key player and source of a lot of the intellectual power. He later came over to State when James Baker became secretary and was Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asia Bureau.

Under Secretary McCormack was very interested in the actual talks, but didn't have a lot of time given the nature of his job, which had global responsibilities. So I ended up spending about 50% of my time preparing for the talks. The staffs prepared huge briefing books with a lot of papers and the Japanese were sometimes quite startled about how much we knew about the intricacies of these issues.

Q: You know, what you're talking about is that a U.S. government official is saying to another country that you've got to change your internal system. There may have been problems but it is like someone coming to the U.S. a few decades again and saying I'm sorry, but you have a racist policy in North Carolina and this is inhibiting our trade with you so get with it and desegregate. It's almost that.

WHITE: Oh, yes. We basically were telling the Japanese to change the way they did things domestically because their domestic policies were affecting external markets. We had already negotiated most of the easy things. Governments are expected to complain about quotas and tariffs, but we were going into the hard core domestic stuff. People recognized that this was something different and something that could easily cause a lot of negative reaction in Japan. The USG team was sensitive to this concern and one result was that we worked on the Japanese press quite hard to try to convince the Japanese that they were the ones suffering from their government's restrictive policies.

One of the things done early in the talks was a joint survey of prices by Ministry of Trade (MITI) and Commerce Department officials. They'd take a certain camera as an example. They'd look at the price in Tokyo and New York and Osaka and Chicago in the same kind of store. They did that for a range of goods and not surprisingly the goods made in the U.S. were more expensive in Japan, but the Japanese goods were also more expensive in Japan. When the Japanese consumers saw these results they suddenly got the sense that there was something wrong with their system. The very high prices were in large part because of the many layers of the distribution system. So we actually got some sympathetic press. USG officials gave talks to different groups in various parts of the country. In certain areas like distribution we made progress because we had some Japanese allies, entrepreneurs who wanted to open larger stores themselves.

Q: This price difference must show that somebody was getting money out of this system, particularly politicians and business people. I know that prices for food are renowned for being much higher than justified in Japan. You had to be breaking a very large number of rice bowls in the political field and also those with clout within the Japanese system.

WHITE: That was certainly part of the problem. I mentioned in talking about the distribution system the fact that the mom and pop stores had a great deal of power; this group was a very strong supporter of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The other two really strong supporters of the LDP were farmers and the construction industry. So agriculture, construction and distribution are three areas where not surprisingly we've had a lot of problems. Contributions from these groups support the LDP and the LDP then gives back to them by subsidies, contracts or protectionist legislation.

What helped on the distribution side was that some domestic interests weren't happy with the system. We worked with stores like Toys-R-Us that wanted to go into the market in a big way but were block by square foot limitations and other regulations. There were some Japanese supermarkets and others who wanted to expand as well and they were being blocked by the fact that the little stores didn't want competition. Enough countervailing pressure was generated on the Japanese side that MITI did end up relaxing the size limits on retail stores. Toys-R-Us eventually opened over 100 stores in Japan.

One way that the Japanese government dealt with this domestically was by giving out money to who were considered the losers. In Japanese cities, there were little shopping arcade streets with small shops with fairly limited merchandise. They had their charm, but prices were high and few of the goods were imported. The plan was to give these small stores a big chunk of money and allow them upgrade. There were also plans to create new malls in the downtown areas with a big anchor store, with the small stores filling in and staying viable. It would also keep people downtown. That was the plan and the money helped smooth the way for changes. The problem they couldn't address, more apparent now years later, is that young people weren't attracted to this kind of business so the little stores are disappearing in some cities. People also have cars more and will drive to big stores.

Things have gotten a lot better on the distribution side for big operators and in fact now there are even some discount stores in Japan, which was considered heresy. Many Japanese officials claimed their people would never go for discounts as they valued name brands and quality so much but the economic slowdown proved the theory wrong. Of course the irony is that all the toys that Toys-R-Us brings into Japan are from China, not the U.S., but at least we achieved some market opening.

Q: What about dealing with MITI?

WHITE: MITI is the well-known Ministry of International Trade and Industry, now METI for Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

Q: Yes, MITI has been seen as a power within a power. Was this a responsive organization or was it a tightly disciplined bureaucracy?

WHITE: It was a conflicted organization in a way because they represented the big exporters like Toyota and Fuji Film, the cutting edge companies who were making a lot of money and didn't want to see their trading partners discontented. MITI also had divisions and bureaus that represented the old guard who just wanted to protect the traditional, increasingly inefficient industries. There was - still is - a dual Japan, with a very modern, very efficient manufacturing sector and a very inefficient service sector. MITI had to balances these interests and of course there were politicians on both sides. Some politicians supported Toyota and other big exporters and others represented the small shopkeepers who wanted to preserve their interests. That made it pretty difficult for MITI officials to get an internal position, let alone come to agreement with other ministries with their own agendas.

One interesting thing about the Japanese bureaucracy was that they didn't really talk to each other very much. You'd get into a negotiation and realize that the Foreign Ministry and MITI people hadn't coordinated positions or talked much at all before hand. It sometimes seemed that they were seeing each other for the first time while sitting together across at the table from us. In comparison, as difficult as the bureaucratic infighting could be in Washington, we were a lot better coordinated and a lot more on the same page than the Japanese were in at least a few of our negotiations.

To sum up, the SII talks went at a pretty full speed for about three years and then it slowed down and eventually became the deregulation talks. Initially we achieved some really good effects. Ironically, the Japanese took a very hard line against our push for them to improve their business practices, especially to bring more transparency in the keiretsu, the interlocking groups of companies. The subsequent long, damaging economic slowdown had roots in these practices that they wouldn't change, that is, the closed nature of the businesses allowed a lot of uneconomic business decisions. For example, it allowed companies to focus on market share instead of profit, not a practice that can be sustained in a transparent system. In areas where they did loosen their tight control, such as retail distribution, the economy as a whole benefited.

Q: When did you leave this job?

WHITE: I was only there for a year and then I went to the Japan desk (EAP/J) and became head of the economic section there. I began the summer of 1990 and soon after I arrived Iraq invaded Kuwait, so that was the dominant problem for many people.

Q: Was it the same issues on the economic side or were things changing?

WHITE: On the trade side we continued the Structural Impediments talks and I did a lot of work on the distribution system. The Kuwait/Iraq war ended up consuming a lot of our time. Japan was in a unique and uncomfortable position because of Article 9 of their Constitution. Written by the American Occupation authorities, it says that Japan is not allowed to have a military and not allowed to take aggressive military action in international affairs. The Japanese embraced the concept whole-heartedly after the miseries of World War II and became intensely pacifistic as a nation (despite the fact that their Self-Defense Forces are well trained and well equipped.)

When the coalition formed against Iraq, Japan couldn't put boots on the ground both for legal reasons and because of public opinion. Many Americans didn't understand these constraints. We got a lot of calls from congressional offices asking how much of Japan's oil was coming from the Middle East. It was a very high percentage, at least 80%, and that figure obviously showed up in Congressional speeches, e.g. "Japan gets all its oil from the Middle East and they're not sending any soldiers. They're letting us spill blood for their economic growth." The anti-Japanese feelings generated by trade problems were greatly exacerbated by Japan's passive posture.

On the economic side of the war, we got involved in heavy USG pressure on the Japanese to contribute money and eventually they gave about $14 billion to the war effort. They were the only country that actually raised taxes to pay for the Iraq war and for the coalition. It was a difficult process and left bad feelings. A high level official Treasury went in to negotiate this amount but the agreement failed to specify whether it was going to be in dollars or yen. The Japanese said they agreed to a certain amount in yen, but the Americans expected the $14 billion. When the exchange rate went the other way, it got quite unpleasant. There was no good record of the meeting for our side because Treasury didn't allow any Foreign Service Officers in the room to take notes.

The end result of all these problems was that when the coalition had its victory parade down Constitution Avenue, the Japanese weren't invited to sit on the viewing stand with all the other members of the coalition despite the fact that they basically paid all the American costs of the war. When Kuwait took out full page ads in the New York Times and Washington Post thanking all the countries that had helped them, the Japanese weren't mentioned. The Japanese were angry and humiliated and they still remember the slights. The people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who were working on these issues were very burned by that experience and determined never to see it repeated. We saw the results in a much more positive way after 9/11 when they were quick to respond and offer help to the U.S. It shows now in their involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq today, which is far more than I would have expected 15 years ago.

Q: During this time you were dealing with a country whose nose is out of joint and probably quite rightfully so.

WHITE: The Japanese ended up doing things that were enormously difficult for them, even though it was hard for outsiders to see that. Their political system moved very slowly. While there were sophisticated people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office who knew they had to take action - send medics, send mine sweepers, make some physical not just financial contribution - they were stymied by a rigid system. Because the U.S. had provided a security guarantee, they had rested on their peace constitution and hadn't had to define their military role in the world. They eventually ended up sending some mine sweepers, and they did their best to send trucks and autos, vehicles that the troops welcomed for their good air conditioning. U.S. forces modified them for military use but even with the vehicles they made bizarre distinctions. The public and politicians were so wedded to Article 9 that the use of their vehicles in combat situations was unacceptable to them. The vehicles could carry bandages, but not ammunition, that sort of thing. Of course they were used in many ways and some Ministry people were well aware of this but wanted it to be kept quiet. A number of Japanese worked very hard to be supportive and it was hard for them to see the lack of public gratitude.

Q: Were there any warning signs about the Japanese economy and the overinflated bank loans at the time?

WHITE: What we started seeing at that time was the real estate price boom, the bubble that got to ridiculous proportions. That started in the early '90s because a lot of companies held real estate as collateral. They were able to borrow on it and then it became like a pyramid scheme to the degree that at one point the theory was that the Imperial Palace land was worth more than the state of California. The high prices allowed companies to borrow against the land that they had in Tokyo or other cities and then use that money for all sorts of speculation.

It became a bilateral problem when the Japanese began investing in a major way in the U.S. On the one hand, states were trying very hard to get Japanese direct investment in their states. Some states had offices in Tokyo and people working to get companies to come with job-producing factories. They offered subsidies and other incentives. The actual physical plant investment wasn't a problem, but when the Japanese started buying Rockefeller Center and Pebble Beach Golf Course people noticed. These purchases were so visible that there was a strong negative reaction, e.g. "the Japanese are going to buy up this country." At one point a Time Magazine cover had the Statue of Liberty wearing a kimono.

The other one that caused a lot of attention was Sony's purchase of MGM. I was in the Under Secretary's office at the time, so it was probably 1989. He was one of the people who sat on the investment review committee called CFIUS, Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. They were asked to review anything that might involve national security, which usually meant a European company buying up a high tech manufacturing concern, but in this case somebody asked CFIUS to go over the motion picture purchase, perhaps for fear the Japanese would use films for propaganda purposes. McCormack's view was that the case should go through the long process rather than an expedited review so that Congress and other critics could be satisfied that a very careful look had been taken. In the end the purchase was not blocked.

Q: Of course nobody knew what would happen. It didn't seem that Sony Pictures was going to produce Japanese language pictures.

WHITE: No, the fear was somehow Sony would become a propaganda arm of Japanese business/government. One critic pointed to the film Exodus and how much an effect it had in generating American sympathy toward Israel. What if the Japanese started doing that? But that was a rather far-fetched idea, as people are so sophisticated these days and were quite anti-Japanese and suspicious at the time.

Q: Then there was a joke going around about a new ad campaign, now we bring you the new Toyota by those wonderful folks who brought you Pearl Harbor.

WHITE: People used the phrase "economic Pearl Harbor" and that indicates the strong negative feelings toward the Japanese. But their economic onslaught turned out to run its course, and they were actually buying land at highly inflated prices that left them holding bad investments. And not just land. We also saw the Japanese buying Van Gogh paintings for huge sums of money and many purchases went downhill. They ended up holding on to vastly overpriced land and buildings, particularly in Hawaii. They're still recovering from the prices that they paid for buildings and hotels there.

Q: You left that position in '91?

WHITE: Yes, and then I made quite a shift because I went to the Personnel Bureau to work on the Board of Examiners (BEX) for three years from 1991 to 1994.

Q: I always think its interesting when people talk about the Board of Examiners. How were the exams conducted when you were there?

WHITE: There had been changes in the exam and I think they had developed a good process, but also a very strenuous day for the applicants. The oral exams were given to people who had passed the written test and been invited to Washington and various sites around the country for the oral exam. One thing that hadn't changed was the long-running afternoon group exercise. I'll start with that because that's the more traditional segment where five or six people sit around a table with examiners observing. The applicants would play an embassy group that received some foreign aid money. Each person was given a project that he/she had to defend and try to get money for, but we told them right at the beginning that you didn't win by getting your project funded, you were favorably judged if you helped move the group to the best solution for everybody. Not all of the people got that point and some argued strenuously for their own projects even if they were projects deliberately set up to be the weaker ones. The people who got the highest points were those who tried to negotiate a sensible solution. The exercise revealed a lot about how the applicants behaved in a group of their peers.

The morning exercise was new at that time. We began with a demarche exercise. For an hour the applicants read materials that we examiners had created. They received a package which included an instruction cable from Washington telling them to go in to another government and get that government's agreement on a specific issue. They were given talking points and other things like newspaper articles and other background pieces, so they had quite a bit to read in one hour. They then came in and faced two examiners who had specific roles to play and a script to follow. In each case the two examiners had different points of view and usually were from different ministries. For example, I did a demarche on opening Japan's rice market. The roles were a Ministry of Foreign Affairs person who was somewhat more conciliatory and the Ministry of Agriculture person who was not conciliatory at all. The examiners had specific talking points to use in response to what the applicant said. It was quite a challenge, particularly for a young person right out of college, to present a case, to answer arguments and in some cases to counter some hostility from the examiner. Sometimes we were told to get exasperated and judge how the person reacted. Then their task was to go back and write a cable reporting on the discussion. They had to remember all the points, what had been said, who had said it, and then analyze and comment on the meeting, which is difficult for somebody who hasn't had experience with that sort of thing.

The final part of the morning, which continued after a brief break to let the applicant take notes, was the hypothetical situations. In the consular, administrative and public affairs area, we would put the applicant in situations that might happen at an embassy or a consulate and see how they reacted. We asked follow-up questions. It was a way to see how people thought on their feet, what kind of logic they used and in some cases such as the consular questions how much compassion they had for an American in trouble.

Q: What was your impression of the candidates you were seeing? You were seeing the ones who had passed a rather rigorous written exam?

WHITE: First, it was a great job because we were seeing people who were eager and interested and had positive impressions of the State Department, which wasn't always true in this country at the time. We got some right out of college, others who were looking at second careers such as retired military. It was quite a variety. We had a good mix of male and female candidates. I don't remember what the percentages were, but they weren't totally skewed toward men. This was at a time when there had been a lawsuit about bias against women in the written Foreign Service exam, which I can talk about a bit later. Most of the people had a few years experience. We occasionally saw a very bright 22 or 23 year old, but the exam favored people who had some work experience. People who were very well educated but with only academic experience, 28 year old Ph.D.s for example, tended not to do as well. My theory was that they'd just spent too much time on campuses to have a good sense of how you operated in the real world.

Regarding the retired military, we saw quite a few and they were a mixed bag. Some of them were superb, others were clearly non-starters. Some were very good in the hypothetical situations given their practical experience, but others could only follow the rules and refer decisions to their superiors, being unable to think outside the box, which is not what we were looking for.

The other interesting thing about personalities was that some people did beautifully in the morning when they were facing two examiners who were in a sense their superiors, and we'd assume that these people would be a sure pass. Then they'd completely blow it in the afternoon session with their peers because they were much too domineering.

The process gave a really good sense of the personality. We were not looking for intellectual knowledge at this stage. They'd proven that in the written exam. What we were looking for was adaptability, flexibility, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, negotiating skills. There was a whole list of personal characteristics that we gave numerical scores.

At this time I also did a certain amount of recruiting on college campuses. We gave the test in different cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and some of the BEX people took the occasion to go to campuses to speak. That was always a very positive experience, given the chance to talk about what Foreign Service was, to answer questions and to give advice. We were interested in visiting schools outside the traditional Ivy League or big name schools, and were happy to talk to minority groups to increase their interest in and awareness of the Foreign Service.

Q: What was the climate for recruiting for the Foreign Service at the time?

WHITE: In the mid '90s it was positive. There were no strong feelings as presumably there were during the Vietnam War, when many had a negative attitude toward the government. The one thing that tended to cause people to stop and think happened after they passed the oral. At that point two different examiners who had read their files would interview them. I might add when the examiners saw them in the morning and early afternoon, it was a blind test. We didn't know if a person spoke five languages and had lived in 18 countries. We knew nothing about them. However, the interviewers who saw the people who had succeeded that far had read the information they had provided in the application. The personal interview always started with the examiner asking if, "do you really know what you're getting into? Do you understand that you would have to always defend the policies of the United States? This means not just in public or with reporters or other obvious situations, but even if you're sitting around a dinner table with your foreign national friends. You're always on call and always representing the USG. You have to defend the administration's position on global warming or Palestine or whatever." That gave some people pause. I think most of them swallowed and said, well, administrations change and I'll manage.

Q: Yes. Were you feeling the effects of the clash between the administration and Congress and the fact that the administration at that time was not particularly prone to get extra funds. The State Department was being pared down and starved a bit without a lot of new people coming in.

WHITE: That hurt the process because when people had passed all these stages, they then needed a medical clearance and a security clearance which took time. Once that was complete and they were on the rolls, they might wait for a year or even two years for an appointment. If they weren't hired by then they had to start over. That was pretty bleak for people to look at putting their lives on hold and not knowing when there would be a position for them. I think we probably lost good people during that time after they'd gone through all the process and showed themselves to be good candidates.

Q: Where were the candidates coming from? I mean colleges and geographic distribution.

WHITE: My sense was that it was a fairly broad group of Americans. People from the major D.C. schools like Georgetown and George Washington were always well represented, but there were people from lesser known colleges and those not well known for their international programs. There were applicants from various majors, though those who majored in political science, international affairs or economics predominated. And there were candidates from all different age groups as well, which is a strength of the process. People looking for second careers came with a strong sense of the kind of careers they wanted and with good skills.

Q: Was there any particular push to get more women in?

WHITE: It was pretty much an even playing field. There was no sense that we needed to put a thumb on the scales or give anything extra to women candidates. In the oral exam, the pass rates were proportional to the male/female ratio of candidates. Where that issue was controversial was in the written test, and that is one reason I stayed on an extra year.

In my final year and a half I spent a lot of time going over the questions with the people who produced the written test in Princeton. We were responding to a class action lawsuit that had indicated that there was a failure rate for the written test considerably higher for women than men. The question was whether certain questions were biased. On several occasions we got sample questions from Princeton and I called together a group of junior Foreign Service Officers. I gave the test to them and then we looked at questions where there was a dramatic difference between the men who got it right and the women who got it right. I don't remember details, but we emailed those who took the test to ask why they thought there was such discrepancy. We deleted those questions whether or not we could figure out why it happened. My sense at the time was that it was simply that the male students were taking courses that tended to be a more in the political science and economic field whereas the women candidates were more language and humanities majors.

I had joined one of the lawsuits, not because I'd ever had problems myself, but I was so struck by the disparity in statistics on promotion and assignments. I was deposed by the lawyer at one point. She took a test from a recent and went through question by question, finding examples that in themselves didn't seem important, like what is the capital of Burundi. She would ask if that was something you really need to know to be in the Foreign Service. I answered that such specific knowledge wasn't needed, but the range of questions together indicated a breath of knowledge that is relevant. We went through 40 questions, with her asking the same thing and me giving the same answer. At any rate we did work very hard to try to get a fair test.

Q: By the time you were there you felt that you were getting a good representation of women then.

WHITE: My sense was yes, that it was pretty well balanced, perhaps 30-40% women entering. We seldom had days with just male candidates. One time the group was all women and they all wore navy blue suits which was kind of amusing. When I did the introduction, I joked that they had heard about the uniform.

Getting back to the question of background and preparation, I was often asked by students what they should do to prepare. I gave my own view, which was that political science was not necessarily the best discipline because it could be more theory than reality. I recommended history, government, constitutional law and economics. I also said they should read the New York Times and strongly recommended The Economist.

The other thing I recommended was that people shouldn't necessarily be professional students. I suggested that after undergraduate work they should take a year or two off and go teach English in Japan or Spain and maybe go on for a masters, but said people shouldn't spend time just in one school after another. Work experience really improved chances of passing the test.

Q: The other thorny problem is minorities, particularly African Americans and particularly African American men. What were you doing?

WHITE: There was a program, the Pickering Scholarship, which helped minority students with tuition to study international relations or a field that could lead them to the Foreign Service. They had internships at State and embassies during their school years. I believe that they were then able to go directly into the oral exam. They skipped a step, but they still had to pass the oral exam just as everyone else. In fact the examiners didn't know that they had been given the fellowship. I don't know what the statistics were on pass rates and how many of those continued with the Foreign Service. We occasionally saw the students from the program and they were usually quite good and passed on the merits, which is exactly what was intended. We also did a lot of recruiting when we went to colleges and offered to give talks to African American clubs.

Q: When I was on the Board of Examiners we disagreed with the emphasis on the traditional black colleges. We felt that to get good candidates, you needed to go to Berkeley or to Harvard or Chicago. Was this being done?

WHITE: We recognized that we needed to go to all types of schools, Ivy Leagues, Big Ten, etc. That's why we tried to target certain groups or associations in the larger schools. I didn't visit any traditional black colleges myself and think the emphasis on those had lessened. A problem we ran into was that excellent minority candidates got job offers from a number of places, banks and corporations. In addition to higher pay and benefits, they could hire people immediately, a problem with the Foreign Service process.

Q: You did this until '94 and then what?

WHITE: Then I went to Ottawa as trade policy officer.

Q: This must have been an interesting time to be trade policy officer wasn't it?

WHITE: It was interesting after having so much experience with Japan on difficult trade policy issues to find out that with our dear neighbor Canada we have equally intractable issues with an enormous amount of emotion involved. I think it is partly because the two countries are so close. Also I found that the Canadians officials who worked on trade policy issues were capable and nice people but very defensive. Canadians see a ten to one American to Canadian ratio and see most of their media coming across the border, so they really do have a lot of cultural identity problems. I think they've relaxed a bit since then. It was interesting to see how hard fought these issues were. Some of them never get resolved.

Q: In the first place where did the trade policy officer work? You've got the Department of Commerce, you've got the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), you've got the economic counselor. Where did you fit in?

WHITE: The embassy had an Economic Minister and I was in essence his deputy. In addition to an excellent Canadian trade specialist, there were two American FSOs working for me, one on trade policy and the second person who did finance and macroeconomic reporting. He was a State person but reported to Treasury. Treasury used to have one person in Ottawa but had eliminated that position. Also in the econ section were a fisheries officer, science and technology officer, and a transportation officer who handled things like aviation and customs which were quite difficult because of the enormous border traffic.

Q: Fisheries are a problem that goes back to colonial times. The issues really don't get any easier. As the number of fishes decreases it gets worse.

WHITE: Yes, Pacific salmon was very difficult. The tricky part of Pacific salmon is that during the course of their lifetime they keep moving from American to Canadian to American Alaskan waters and the question is whose fish are they? There were also some Atlantic coast problems having to do with scallops and other things. Yes, you go back to the 19th century and I'm sure they were dealing with the same kind of issues.

I worked very closely with the U.S. Trade Representative's office and the Economic Bureau at the State Department as well as the Canada Desk in the European Bureau. We handled a lot of delegations and negotiations. I also worked closely with the Agricultural Counselor and the Agriculture Department.

Some of the issues really were border issues. There was a constant small and long-running potato war going on between Maine and parts of Quebec that was rather strange because it seemed that all the people involved seemed to be related. They were families on both sides of the borders who had common great grandmothers. It had to do with the size of potatoes and which ones could come into Canada. It was a standards issue that never really got resolved. The Maine senators were upset because their potatoes were being kept out of Canada because they were the wrong size or shape.

Of greater economic significance were the grain issues. Senators like Max Baucus and other northern state Members of Congress were upset about the shipments of Canadian wheat coming across the border. They felt that the Canadian Wheat Board provided Canadian farmers with an unfair government subsidy. They have a very complicated way of setting their prices which I couldn't begin to remember, but which the American farmers and congressmen claimed gave an unfair trade advantage. The Canadians countered by saying that the U.S. had export subsidies for wheat, which meant that we were sending our wheat overseas, which meant there was demand for Canadian wheat, particularly wheat used for pasta. Therefore, the Canadians said, we're just meeting the demand.

Canadians softwood lumber was the most difficult issue and it continued for years.

Q: What were the issues in lumber?

WHITE: The provinces have government control over the lumber, generally because they own the land and set fees, so again it's a subsidy/ countervailing duty issue.

Q: Well, you were saying it was a very complicated issue, but how did you operate? I'm talking about you personally. Did you sit on delegations and act as embassy spokesperson or the embassy observer or participant or something like that?

WHITE: I sat on delegations as the embassy representative but I didn't play the role of intermediary between the Canadian and U.S. governments as much as I might have in another embassy. For one thing it got to the point where people on both sides knew each other well because these talks went on so long. Also geography played a role. Because we were in the same time zone, if the deputy USTR wanted to talk to the director general in Ottawa, he wasn't going to send a message to me to deliver to the director general. He'd just pick up the phone. There was a lot of direct phone contact, which took away the need for the traditional role that embassy officers play. For example in Japan people just didn't make phone calls like that. We'd get interagency cleared instructions from Washington, then make an appointment to make a demarche to ministry officials, then write a reporting cable. It was a bit frustrating for people working on different initiatives at the embassy, as people in Washington did a lot without them.

Q: I've heard people say that one of the problems of dealing with trade matters, negotiating with the Canadians is that they can put forward a team that's been together and dealing with the issue for a decade or more whereas we change the administrations and officials. Was this a problem?

WHITE: In this case I don't think it was because the people who were working on these issues really did spend a lot of time on them. On lumber, even the deputy USTR was forced to learn the details fast because it was so political in the U.S. They got up to speed pretty quickly. I don't think there was that much of a disadvantage. The political fight was because softwood lumber in the U.S. is grown in a number of states, particularly a wide band across the South. It is used in construction. The American producers contented that the Canadian "subsidized" lumber was coming in at such low prices that it was causing injury. This got a lot of resonance on the Hill. What got totally ignored was the interest of the consumer who actually benefited from having a good supply of lumber. In fact there was one big meeting where one representative of a construction association, representing those who wanted an abundant supply, was there. We noticed that the State people and this man were somehow not being told about all the meetings that the softwood lumber people were having with the Commerce Department and USTR. There was a certain us against them sense at least with some of the Commerce Department people. We wanted to find a reasonable solution and they wanted their solution, which was very pro the softwood lumber growers' position.

The solution that was reached during that time was that the Canadians agreed to what was essentially a voluntary restraint agreement that they would enforce a certain level of lumber shipments and the U.S. would not apply countervailing duties. It became a real problem for the Canadians because they then had to divide the numbers up by province and the interests of the British Colombians were very different from the interests of the Quebecers and others. I think they realized that it just wasn't worth it to try to keep this agreement and eventually they let it lapse and the U.S. put on heavy countervailing duties.

I saw something in the press a few years ago that the countervailing duties of the U.S. government were judged illegal under NAFTA and the U.S. was refusing to give back the money, which would seem to put us in direct violation of NAFTA, though that happened after my time.

Q: As you looked over the whole trade issue policy of the two countries at this time, were they adjusting to NAFTA? This was a period of learning because this was quite new.

WHITE: It was new and we were working hard at it. I got involved in several judicial proceedings under the NAFTA. The dispute resolution boards looked at cases involving the U.S. and Mexico and Canada. I don't remember the details of a lot of them, but people took it very seriously. There were long involved presentations before a dispute resolutions board. The people on the board were long time trade experts, academics and people who had worked on trade issues for years. We respected the experts and the procedures and tried very hard to make it work.

Q: Did you see our Special Trade Representative Mickey Kantor in operation? What was your impression of how he worked?

WHITE: He was good working with his counterparts. The one meeting I remember most specifically was a meeting that brought in the Chilean trade minister. It was NAFTA plus what was supposed to be the next member of NAFTA, Chile.

Q: NAFTA was at that point completed but we were talking about bringing Chile in.

WHITE: Yes, a meeting was held in Toronto with the four trade ministers. Kantor could be very tough but also diplomatic. He was good with people and had a politician's touch. At the Toronto meeting, everyone was very positive about Chile's economic policy and situation and how the country would fit well in NAFTA. It still hasn't happened and that has been a big disappointment.

Another Kantor trip to Ottawa was during a visit of the Clintons. I was with his entourage in the hotel lobby just after arrival. A young man stopped him and gave an impassioned two or three minute speech about how awful the death penalty was in the United States and we shouldn't have it. People were standing there looking a little upset that this person just came in and grabbed Kantor unexpectedly. Kantor listened to him very politely and thanked him for his opinion on a difficult subject. I thought that was very gracious of him given the tumult and tight scheduling of a visit.

Q: Did you find a lot of bureaucratic rivalries?

WHITE: It was a small trade community in Canada. One interesting thing is that their Department of Foreign Affairs and Department of Trade was consolidated as DFAIT. At any rate they didn't have the split that we had in the U.S. between State and Commerce or State and USTR. We didn't see any obvious signs of internal conflict. They were usually pretty up front about what their positions were

Both the Canadians and the Americans had protectionist policies, with guilt on different things, usually involving agriculture. The U.S. has a protectionist sugar policy. The Canadians had an equally ridiculous poultry and dairy policy. Even ice cream exports from the U.S. were restricted to protect Quebec farmers. In domestic Canadian politics, there was always the complication of Quebec separatism. Given how tense things were at the time, nobody was about to touch the protection of their farmers.

Q: Did Cuba cause problems?

WHITE: Yes. This was when the Helms Burton legislation was passed which put sanctions on foreign companies that gained benefit from properties expropriated in Cuba. One of the first cases involved a nickel producer in Alberta. The company had major operations in Cuba and the head of it planned to continue doing business with Cuba. There wasn't a lot the U.S. could do since one of the provisions was to refuse officials of offending companies visas to go to the U.S. This man didn't try to go to the U.S. and was happy with his business in Cuba.

Canadian attitudes toward Cuba were very different from those of the U.S. A lot of Canadians went to Cuba on vacation because it was cheap. The Canadian government objected to Helms-Burton because of its extraterritorial aspects, as did most of our European allies. A dinner topic conversation was about how ridiculous American policy was, but of course as a Foreign Service officer one had to either keep quiet or make a lukewarm defense.

Q: Well, when you think about it the Helms Burton amendment was not done with great care. Apparently one of the aims was to penalize companies benefiting from property confiscated from Americans and Cubans who later moved to the U.S.

WHITE: Yes, that is why this Alberta company was in violation. They either leased or managed a property that had been expropriated and the owners not compensated.

Q: What about social life there? I've heard varying accounts from people who had a wonderful time and those who found pervasive anti-Americanism. How did you find it?

WHITE: I loved living in Ottawa. It's a small city. It doesn't have much in terms of lively night life but I wasn't looking for that anyway. There was an orchestra and a nice concert hall, though it wasn't particularly world class. There were some good restaurants. There is a lively downtown marketplace where stalls sell fresh foods and flowers, a great place on weekend mornings. At that time the embassy was in an old building directly across from the Parliament. Every summer day I could watch the changing of the guard, with a marching band and ceremony. It is a picturesque area, great for outdoor activities. Quebec is just across the river and the Gatineau Hills have places to hike. The Rideau Canal runs through the middle of the city and one can walk along the path in the summer and skate on it in the winter. So in terms of lifestyle it was very pleasant.

Canadians as individuals, not in their official roles, were friendly and pleasant to work with. In their official roles they could be very prickly and sometimes anti-American, but that tended to be a few individuals who I think just had been looking at trade issues too long.

Q: Well, how about what the British call the chattering class, the intellectuals?

WHITE: There was a certain amount of fashionable intellectual anti-Americanism, particularly in Toronto. That's where the media and the media money were located. They felt threatened by American magazines and other media. They had rather ridiculous rules about what could be played on the CBC radio, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, where there were quotas for air time. An artist had to be Canadian, the song had to be written by Canadians or it had to be produced by Canadians, two out of three. I believe that the songs of Celine Dion didn't qualify because she had a production contract with somebody in the U.S. and some of her songs had been written in the U.S. Even though she was the major French Canadian singer and one of the biggest stars in the U.S., she didn't qualify for the quota at least for a time. That was one of the absurd examples.

Culture was definitely a concern of some Canadians as they felt that their culture was being overwhelmed by American culture. It was only natural, as most of the population lived within 100 miles of the border and so they received American TV and radio. It is too bad that they couldn't accept and be proud of Quebec culture, Ontario literature, Maritime music as vibrant parts of a North American culture, just like Cajun in the U.S. or country music from Texas. But of course there were commercial interests involved.

One interesting thing I'll mention is the military band marched down to Parliament each day as the guard was changed and they always played marches. In all the time I was there I never heard them play a John Philip Sousa march. That shows how ridiculous their cultural hang-ups could be, as it takes a lot of effort to find good marching songs and completely avoid John Philip Sousa.

Q: I've talked to people with kids at schools and all say that their kids came back telling about teachers who were always criticizing the United States. Was this a problem?

WHITE: I heard such complaints, but I had no direct experience as my daughter was then in college. Some teenagers seemed to deal with it pretty well and find it a little silly, but it was hard for them when a teacher aimed pointed comments at them.

Q: In addition to the Quebec issue, were there a lot of local and regional differences that affected U.S. interests? Canada is quite decentralized in a way and Ontario is its own world. Quebec of course everybody knows about, but also you have the Maritimes and then the prairie states and British Columbia. Did you find that the differences manifested themselves in your work?

WHITE: This was very much a concern of the Canadian government and the Canadian press at the time. I did one long trip where I basically started in British Columbia and worked my way back across the provinces in order to do a long report on devolution. I wanted to call the cable "you say you want a devolution," but people didn't get the Beatles allusion. The report didn't attract much attention in the USG. It was internal politics and it didn't seem particularly relevant to policy makers, except of course for the Quebec question.

I did sense clear regional differences and often a real lack of attachment to the central government. In the Pacific Northwest, people felt they had so much in common with Washington, Oregon, Northern California that they could see themselves surviving without the central government in Ontario. Vancouver felt very different with its strong Asian orientation. They felt disconnected from Toronto and Ottawa. Alberta, too, felt quite independent because they had so much oil and gas revenue and at that time a very healthy beef industry. They were the richest province in Canada and they were developing politically along what you would call red state lines. They wanted low taxes, little government involvement, and wanted the central government just to stay away from them because they were doing perfectly well by themselves, thank you very much.

I went to Regina, Saskatchewan, and Winnipeg, Manitoba; there wasn't much dynamism there. I remember asking about unemployment in Saskatchewan and the official said it was very low - but because young people left after they finished high school or college due to the lack of jobs there. The Maritimes were similar in losing population because of the declining fishing industry. There was some oil and gas revenue and some tourism but they felt without a strong central Canada they'd really be in trouble. There were jokes that the U.S. could help them by adding them to the New England states.

Q: I'm told that the Maritimes look more towards Boston as their capital.

WHITE: There are strong ties. I'm from New England and saw great similarities. Names of people, styles of towns and houses in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts are all the same. The other joke was that if the Maritimes wanted to join the U.S., the U.S. wouldn't want them because they were in such economical difficulty.

The Quebec question of course was the most important political issue while I was there. At that time there was a major referendum in Quebec as to whether they would vote for independence. It was traumatic for many people in Ontario. I don't think the western provinces were so deeply affected. We watched rallies on the Parliament lawn where average people talked about what Canada meant to them and begged the Quebecers not to leave. Everyone was glued to the TVs that night as the very close vote was tallied. They had a kind of a gauge and it would slip from 49% for to 51% for and then back to 49 ï¿½ % against and it ended up something like 51% to stay with Canada and 49% voted to leave. That seems to have been the high point of the separatist movement.

The U.S. had a tricky role to play because obviously we did not want to see the Canadian government blown apart by this vote. It was by no means certain that Quebec would have been able to leave as neatly as the proponents claim and there would have been a period of instability. But we couldn't be seen as interfering in their internal affairs. I used to get a lot of questions about NAFTA and whether an independent Quebec could quickly join. Our position was that Quebec should not assume that they would automatically be a member of NAFTA if they left Canada, though that was their assumption. It wasn't something we wanted to discuss publicly. In fact, Quebec would have faced tough negotiations as we didn't like some of their textile exports in addition to the dairy protection. Anyway it was a relief when the effort failed.

Q: Where did you go after Canada?

WHITE: In the summer of 1996, I became the Director of the Bilateral Trade Office in the Economic Bureau. That had two divisions for developed and developing countries. We worked various free trade agreements, including NAFTA, the Generalized System of Preferences for developing countries and other bilateral issues. We had to coordinate closely with the regional bureaus.

The China Most Favored Nation (MFN) issue was a major issue during that time. We worked with USTR and the China desk to get the Chinese government to improve their trade practices but also faced a yearly Congressional vote on the continuation of MFN tariff treatment for China.

Q: In the first place, were you working on adjustments to the finished NAFTA or were you working on new members?

WHITE: NAFTA was still evolving. The dispute settlement process was developing as cases were brought we wanted to make sure the procedures were in order. There was increasing political opposition to free trade and a lot of it was focused on the plan to expand NAFTA to include Chile. I don't think it came to a Congressional vote because it was determined that it wouldn't pass, though Chile met the economic criteria.

Q: What was the problem with Chile?

WHITE: It was hard to understand as Chile posed little threat to American interests. Even the agricultural products would come in on a different cycle. The opposition seemed to be more the ever-present populist sense that somehow freer trade disadvantaged American workers. It was a feeling unrelated to facts.

More specifically, the opposition focused on the labor and environmental provisions. The argument was that there would be a race to the bottom. Under NAFTA the rule was the country had to abide by its own labor and environmental standards. The labor movement felt that Chile's labor laws were too weak. I assume that the environmental movement was also saying that the standards weren't high enough and therefore it disadvantaged the U.S.

Totally lost in the debate was the fact that there really weren't that many trade barriers in the U.S. and there wasn't going to be a huge expansion of exports to the U.S., while an agreement would ensure that the market would be kept open for U.S. producers. NAFTA was very valuable to U.S. interests when Mexico went through its financial crisis, as our trade continued while that of Europeans and others with Mexico declined sharply, but it was an argument that we have never really have managed to get across.

I worked on trying to set up a public program whereby State Department speakers could use talking points on trade as they went around the country. We tried to get state by state statistics so if an assistant secretary was going to Tennessee, for example, he would have statistics on the jobs that were created by FedEx or UPS centers involved in international trade. The idea was to point out that trade created jobs, not just sent them overseas. But apart from people in the Economic Bureau the idea never caught on and there wasn't much support from the public affairs people.

Q: What was the problem with China? Was it just because China was communist and had lousy human rights?

WHITE: The reason for the annual Congressional vote was the Jackson-Vanik Act, which had originally been aimed at the Soviet Union. We didn't have specific trade problems like today where China is the new economic giant with a huge trade surplus and an undervalued currency, but there was still a sense that China was a potential threat to the U.S. in economic and security issues. We in EB worked with USTR, Commerce, Treasury and the China desk at the State Department to prepare one pager summaries. These were used as background with various audiences. For example, we wrote on issues as diverse as slave labor in China and connections the Chinese military had with Chinese factories; these were issues raised by labor groups, human rights groups and Congress. There were probably 30 or 40 of these one pagers that set forth the claims or accusations and then laid out the facts. Of course the reality in some cases was fairly grim, but perhaps not as bad as the opponents were making out. We argued that the U.S. and the west would benefit from drawing China further into the global system, that by exposing the Chinese people to Western influences through trade, they would become more aware of democratic trends and seek more of a say in their own government.

Q: Where did the World Trade Organization fit into your work?

WHITE: The WTO was handled by a neighboring office in the Economic Bureau. While we kept informed about their activities and vice versa, my office didn't directly work on the WTO.

Q: I would think that almost everything you were doing would be connected. The World Trade Organizations as I understand encourages liberal trade regimes, as your office does.

WHITE: We worked very closely with them. It was important that the bilateral negotiations remained consistent with multilateral rules. There was, and continues to be, a debate about whether bilateral or regional agreements help or harm multilateral efforts. It is obviously much better for the world to be following one set of rules, and a multilateral agreement avoids trade diversion and rules of origin problems. But the counter argument is that it can be easier to get a few countries to agree to a more high quality agreement; that can then serve as a model for future multilateral talks.

Unfortunately, then as now there was great resistance to trade liberalization and it was difficult to bring about a wider accord. At that time the disastrous WTO meeting in Seattle was held. It was supposed to initiate the current Doha Round but ended up notorious for the rioting in the streets, with trade ministers unable to get to the meeting because the roads were blocked by anti-globalization demonstrators.

Q: My son-in-law was helping block some of those when he was younger.

WHITE: Yes, all sorts of people demonstrated against the talks and sadly it was the violent ones who had the impact. There were union people and environmentalists who were middle of the road but their message was lost in the destruction caused by a group of anarchists. The multilateral system seemed to be breaking down or at least not moving forward. The push toward more bilateral and regional free trade agreements was growing stronger. Many of us who worked on trade found that regrettable. It's much better to have a strong multilateral system than a patchwork of different regional FTAs.

Q: Well, then you were doing this until '94 to '96. Then where did you go?

WHITE: Then I became Director of the Japan desk and I was there from '98 to 2001. This was in the East Asia bureau (EAP.) It was an excellent job at this time of my career with a lot of management responsibilities. Also, for the first time, I worked a great deal on security and political issues, much more so than economic issues, so it was an interesting challenge to get up to speed quickly.

Q: What were the major security issues?

WHITE: In September 1998, about a month after I began the position, the North Koreans shot a type of long-range missile, the Taepodong, which they claimed was a test or a launch of a satellite that failed. It flew over Japan and the Japanese reacted very strongly to that. It made them feel very vulnerable. Before that, the public hadn't really felt that Japan as a country could be a target. During the Cold War the feeling was that if Japan were to be a target, it would be because the Soviet Union was targeting American bases in Japan. With the missile shot and North Korea's nuclear ambitions, they suddenly realized that Japan itself could be a target. They needed a lot of reassurance that they were still under our nuclear umbrella and that we would come to their aid. One Japanese official told me that the Taepodong missile had the same effect on Japan as the takeover of the embassy in Tehran had on the U.S. It made a country realize its vulnerability.

The North Korean issue was very important throughout my three years on the desk. At that time former Secretary of Defense William Perry had started a process called the Trilateral Coordinating Group (TCOG) which brought the South Koreans and the Japanese together before and after each U.S. negotiation with the North Koreans. He was followed by State Department Counselor Wendy Sherman, who was well respected. There was a great deal of coordinating work; it worked well to keep the Japanese and South Koreans assured that they were informed of everything going on in bilateral talks. The personalities involved worked well together and I think it was an excellent exercise in diplomacy.

Q: How did you find the Japanese and South Korean relationship?

WHITE: It has always been a difficult relationship because Japan colonized Korea in 1905 and there are still many negative feelings. The Koreans remember that the Japanese punished Koreans for speaking Korean during that period. Many Koreans were sent to Japan almost as slave laborers during World War II and the comfort women issue remains very painful. However the animosity wasn't as strong then as it is today. The TCOG process was significant because the Japanese and Koreans met together with the Americans and put aside the history problems to work toward a common goal, dealing with North Korea. It is sad that those good working relationships never spread to a wider number of officials or to the general public in both countries.

Q: What was our position at that time and what were the North Koreans up to?

WHITE: The Agreed Framework was in place at that time so the plutonium that the North Koreans had been reprocessing was under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision. There were IAEA inspectors at the nuclear plant in North Korea and the plutonium was in fuel rods under constant surveillance. The question was who was going to pay for the quid pro quo. KEDO, the Korean Economic Development Organization, had been set up after the 1994 crisis to provide energy to North Korea through construction of two light water reactors. I'll leave the details of that to the Korea experts, but it was important to Japan because Japan and South Korea were going to pay the bulk of the money to construct the power plants to replace the nuclear program the North Koreans gave up. There were a lot of delays in that for one reason or other. The U.S. Congress never like it and delayed sending heavy fuel oil, there was suspicion about the North Koreans having an underground testing facility that had to be investigated, and the North Koreans were not particularly receptive to the South Korean technicians coming in. It went very slowly. However at least the North Koreans were not making nuclear bombs, which is not the case today unfortunately.

Q: Yes. Did the Russian occupation of the northern islands come up while you were there?

WHITE: Yes, the Northern Territories issue has been a constant problem and Japan doesn't have a peace treaty with the Russians from World War II because of this territorial complaint. The Soviet Union took over four islands north of Hokkaido just at the end of the war.

When I was following Japan's relationship with the Soviet Union back in the '80s there was a sense that if only the two countries could have better relations it would benefit both; Japan had the money and the technology and the Soviet Union had the resources. It was always thought that the big turnaround was just around the corner. When they could finally get things resolved politically and the Russians became a little more reliable in their bureaucratic and legal policies, people could do business. Well, that's never happened, largely because the Northern Territories issue remains unresolved. Putin has gotten even more hard line than people in the '80s. I don't see a political solution coming anytime soon.

Q: Were we playing any role in trying to help them resolve the problem?

WHITE: I don't know what U.S. officials were saying to the Russians. We hoped for resolution and we supported the Japanese, but there was not really a useful role that we could play.

Q: The Northern Territories seem to be sparse and bare.

WHITE: Not many people live there. But like so many of these little rocks or islands, they have fish and other resources around them so whoever can claim them gains fishing rights and possibly access to oil. There are also questions of maritime passage and it becomes very symbolic of one's sovereignty.

Q: How about our troops on Okinawa and other bases in Japan?

WHITE: The U.S. military presence on Okinawa has been controversial for some time. The U.S. held the islands after World War II and it wasn't until 1972 that Okinawa reverted to Japan. The reversion talks were interesting, a successful diplomatic effort at a time when the military hadn't wanted to return Okinawa. It was in the middle of the Vietnam War. There were many troops based in Okinawa who were flying to Vietnam, maybe not directly on bombing runs, but certainly it was a key area for the military.

The Okinawa issue continued to be difficult, however, because even after reversion the Okinawans were left with such an enormous proportion of military forces on their very small islands. There are about three main roads which tend to be choked with military vehicles. It's very noisy there with helicopters and planes constantly taking off and landing. The American bases are prime real estate. The Okinawans see the country clubs and the nice housing and compare it to their often cramped towns.

On the other hand the bases are very important geographically because troops there can reach all parts of Asia much more quickly than they could from Guam or other places. They are an important part of the contribution that the Japanese government makes to the U.S.-Japan military relationship. The Japanese either provide the land free of charge to the U.S. government or they pay the rent to the landowners. In Okinawa there are a number of landowners who have tiny plots of land that they rent to the Japanese government for U.S. bases and some of them are making a pretty good living out of that. The question of returning bases has long been difficult in Okinawa.

The American career military knows how important the bases are. Many genuinely believed that the negative attitudes toward U.S. forces really came from a small group of press and local politicians, while the bulk of the people really liked having them there. To a certain extent people did benefit, the shopkeepers and the people getting rents, but I think the military tended to close their minds to the fact that the average citizen resented the noise and the confusion and the occasional very upsetting incident.

Nonetheless I think everybody recognizes that something needs to be done and at the time I was on the desk the return of Futenma Marine Air Station major issue was the major issue. Unfortunately, even today it remains unresolved. Futenma Marine Air Station is basically a helicopter base located in the middle of a very populated area. It is down in a bowl with houses all around it. People have said for years that it's an accident waiting to happen which would be horrific because of the density of population. Under the SACO agreement, Special Advisory Committee on Okinawa, it was agreed that the Japanese government would facilitate the relocation of this base to another place in Okinawa.

At the time I came in one proposal was for an offshore facility to be used as this helicopter base. A number of Japanese construction companies and steel companies were pleased with this idea because it would have been an enormous construction project, but even here in the U.S. some doubts were raised about the feasibility of it, the cost of it and particularly the environmental impact. That idea was on the way out when I came in.

The new proposal was to create a new base in the Nago area, which was a bit outside the more populated cities. During my time talks continued with the Japanese government on that. The complicated fact was that the Okinawan people didn't feel that the Japanese government was taking their wishes into account. While we never negotiated directly with Okinawan local leaders and groups, we often met with them and heard their concerns. Local press and politicians were very vocal and their basic position was that they had the burden of too many bases. Given the concentration there, their position was that if the base was vital for the relationship, move the base somewhere else in Japan. That of course ran into the "not in my backyard" syndrome which was very strong in Japan. The governor said they would accept Nago as a site, but only with a 15 year limit after which U.S. forces would have to leave that base. That's something the U.S. could not accept and never did agree to.

State (EAP) worked very closely with the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) in talks with the Japanese government and efforts to accommodate the Okinawan people as much as possible. Two key players were EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary Rust Deming and OSD Deputy Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell. Both knew Japan well and worked hard and well to maintain the relationship. One way the Japanese government tried to gain local agreement was to pour a lot of money into Okinawa. The people in the Nago area were being promised a lot of central government funding. When the 2000 G-8 Summit was in Japan, the Japanese government decided to hold it in Okinawa. That was to recognize the role of Okinawa, but also, in a sense to bring publicity and money and try to smooth the way for a base. The hotel where the Clinton administration stayed in was in Nago in a beautiful area with nice lagoons.

Q: Did you sense a distance between the Japanese establishment in Tokyo and people in Okinawa?

WHITE: The Okinawans feel that the Japanese government discriminates by burdening them with bases and that mainland Japanese look down on them. And the wartime memories are very painful. There was terrible suffering during the Battle of Okinawa. Just about every family lost family members and they blamed much of that on the Japanese military, not on the Americans, for putting them through it. The Okinawans considered that they were looked down upon as being a bit racially different; the dialect is different. They felt like poor cousins and thought that that's why they ended up with all the bases because they could be sort of out of sight, out of mind. Also, economically the Japanese government has poured a lot of money in and there was domestic tourism, but they haven't done some basic things that would really help the economy like deregulating airlines enough that there could be some start up carriers offering competitive flights outside of tour packages. It's very expensive to get to Okinawa, so businesses aren't locating there.

Q: Any other major military-related issues?

An important and tragic incident took place in February, 2001, when the American submarine the USS Greenville hit and sunk the Ehime Maru in Hawaiian waters. The Ehime Maru was a Japanese fishing vessel, but it was also a training vessel where teenagers were being trained to be fishermen or maritime officers. They had been training near Hawaii and had enjoyed some tourism before resuming their work.

There in Hawaiian waters the American submarine surfaced suddenly in an exercise of rising quickly to the surface. It rammed right into the Ehime Maru and the boat sank almost immediately. Nine people were killed, including four 17-year-olds. It was a terrible incident from many angles. First, there were all these deaths, and they were so young. Second, the submariners were at fault for failing to make sure that there were clear waters all around before suddenly surfacing. Also, it was actually a demonstration for VIPs so had the aspect of a joy ride.

I was on vacation when it happened and it was shocking to see it on the television news. I got back a day later to find the State Department had to closely monitor what the military was doing. DOD and the Navy were doing all they could to find survivors and remains, but while well intentioned, they didn't have a particularly diplomatic touch with their public relations.

First they wouldn't let the captain of the submarine vessel apologize, though an early and sincere apology would have meant a great deal to the Japanese families and public. Military lawyers were concerned that their legal position would be compromised and that if the captain said he was sorry that would be taken as an admission of guilt - though there was no question about who was at fault. Right away the American and the Japanese cultures clashed. If he had come out and bowed deeply to the families right at the beginning, a lot of the resentment and bad feelings could have been avoided in my view. Later, after he left the Navy, he said that he had wanted to do this. During a later court of inquiry, he apologized to the Ehime Maru crew and some families. Some months later he went to Japan and met families to offer his apology, but by then it was too late to head off a firestorm of anger and grief.

It was a major story for weeks - there were front page pictures in newspapers for many days showing pictures of the young students in their aloha shirts in Hawaii. It was terribly painful. The military did well to continue the search for survivors/bodies for a long time. At one point, a week or two after the incident, they sent word through to the Japanese government that they planned to end the search as there was no hope of finding anyone. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official called me in the middle of the night to tell me they were sending a deputy minister to the U.S. to stress how important it was for the search to continue. He was about to get on a plane but we managed to convince them that it would not be useful. In the end the military continued the search at great expense throughout wider and wider areas in order to make the Japanese feel that we were doing all we could.

Another incident showed the different cultures between State and the military. DOD drafted a presidential letter of condolence. When it came for clearance I was a little upset by it because the first paragraph was a well worded sentiment of condolence and grief. But then the letter went on for four paragraphs listing all the Navy was doing in the search. It set totally the wrong tone, so we managed to get it cut back to a very simple condolence, not a self-justification. That showed the importance of working together because the military was looking at the problem from their own point of view and doing their best, but they didn't have a good sense of what the wider impact would be on the Japanese public when this was made public.

Q: Yes. The fact that the captain didn't apologize early on became quite a point of conflict. It does point out that as a rule, the Pentagon lawyers tend to be very protective. They have their reasons, but the point is that often it is the wrong thing.

WHITE: Yes, as I said, the absence of an immediate and personal apology really hurt. The Pentagon quickly realized they had to compensate the victims and they did pay compensation to the parents. There wasn't a lot of arguing about the amounts, but still that was a little later in the game and the public reaction to U.S. Navy maneuvers and methods remained very negative.

Q: Can you talk about your impressions of this G-8 summits?

WHITE: For the Okinawa Summit, I worked mainly on the bilateral side of the visit. There was a different group in the White House and the European and Economic Bureaus who worked on the multilateral side. While I was there for the whole summit, I was concentrating on the events that President Clinton did with the Okinawan people. The main event was a visit to the Peace Park. This is a park at the edge of the ocean where some of the most fierce fighting took place toward the end of the Battle of Okinawa. Many Japanese either died or committed suicide in the caves near there. It's very moving because there are a number of marble plaques with the names of all the dead, not just the Japanese soldiers but the Okinawan civilians and the Americans, Australians, New Zealanders and others who died in the fight. Clinton gave a very good speech at that park in broiling hot weather to a large crowd.

Q: How did the Clinton administration and Clinton himself get along with the Japanese? How was the relationship during the time you were there?

WHITE: Like most presidents, Clinton wanted to develop a personal relationship with his counterparts, but in his two terms he met seven Japanese prime ministers. Just about every time he went to Japan or to a G-8 Summit it was a different person, so he never really developed a personal relationship. There is such a difference in the Koizumi- Bush relationship because Bush sees him a lot so of course they have developed a friendship. Clinton never had a personal interest. He wasn't negative toward the Japanese, though not particularly warm either. Early in the administration there had been a lot of more trade friction, but I wasn't involved at that time. On the desk we worked well and closely with the Asia group at the NSC but among the top people of the Clinton administration there weren't many with strong Japan ties.

Q: What was happening with the Japanese political system? Did we see changes in it? The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had been around for a long time and I was wondering whether Japan might be becoming more independent from the United States.

WHITE: At that time there was a lot of intellectual debate about Japan becoming a "normal nation," meaning Japan should take on more responsibility for its own security. I think most of the Japan hands in the U.S. government thought that it would be a good idea for them to become more self-reliant. We had encouraged the Self Defense Forces to take more forward leaning roles as peacekeepers in various regions. There was concern among pundits that if Japan became a more normal, more independent nation, it could mean that they wouldn't always follow our lead on a lot of issues. Most Japan specialists saw that possibility but felt it would be a healthy development. The alliance was strong enough to manage some disagreement and we had the same core values.

One incident that illustrates this is that after the North Korean Taepodong missile crisis, the Japanese decided they needed their own intelligence satellites. They thought they hadn't been given enough intelligence by the Americans - although they probably had and certain agencies just didn't share it widely. When the idea was proposed, it seemed that a lot of the Japanese press expected the U.S. to step in and object, saying that Japan didn't need its own intelligence satellites. They seemed geared up to complain that the U.S. wouldn't give them the technology needed to build them. That didn't happen.

At State and DOD, we argued that the USG should support Japan. They needed the satellites for their own self-image and sense of pride, and to make them feel they were full partners in the relationship. It would have been harmful to insist on what was in fact the case, that the intelligence we were giving them was better than what they could get by building their own satellites; also it would have been a lot cheaper. So they went forward with a plan to build four satellites at enormous expense.

We had to negotiate an export control agreement to allow them to get some sophisticated technology. I worked with very good people in the Political Military Bureau who took the lead. It required a lot of interagency coordination because there were other satellite related negotiations going on with European countries and people were concerned that the Japan talks would set a precedent about the type of technology we'd share. They finally built the satellites at great expense. Ironically, I've have been told that commercial satellite companies now produce photos as good or better than what they're getting from their own satellites, but nonetheless it was important that they be able to do it as a "normal nation."

Q: How did the Clinton administration view the whole relationship with Japan at that time?

WHITE: They had come into office very hard-line on the trade issues which at the beginning of the '90s were considerably more in the American public eye than they were toward the end of the '90s. They had tried for a few agreements that had numerical targets but the Japanese resisted mightily and it caused a lot of bad feeling between officials of both countries. By the late '90s the concern was much more that Japan's economy was floundering. The economic giant that was going to take over the U.S. was now an enormous drag on Asia. Their growth rates were so low they were not providing any stimulus to growth in other countries and that became much more a focus. The attention shifted in a sense from what USTR could do on specific trade issues to more concern about what Treasury and U.S. businesses could do to urge Japan to get its economic house in order. The banking system had huge amounts of non-performing loans, but it was very difficult to get them to change because there's nothing more domestic than monetary and economic policy. The U.S. government's policy at that time was to promote deregulation of various sectors in hopes that a more free market economy, while painful at first, would give Japan a chance to restructure and use its assets more effectively and efficiently.

Q: Were we pushing for something that today is very much in the forefront, deregulating the postal bank, which is the main banking engine in Japan?

WHITE: Postal reform has been Prime Minister Koizumi's main issue. At the time I was on the desk we were not pushing hard to deregulate it completely because that seemed politically unrealistic. What we were looking at then was the insurance sector, which was related to the postal system. Because they were such a big government organization they were able to offer various kinds of insurance and banking services very cheaply, while we were trying to create opportunities for American companies to compete. There were wider macroeconomic implications, as postal savings money deposited by households in low interest accounts was used to support favored industries and channeled to quasi-governmental organizations. Koizumi later worked to break the system, which is having considerable political impact within the LDP and the way they have operated.

Q: Also on the economic side, they've got two things which seem to be rather inhibiting. One is the role of women in society. The other one is the low fertility rate and the lack of interest in immigration to augment the work force. Do you see any changes in these things?

WHITE: Well, they're connected. It's interesting that the most traditional societies where women do tend to stay at home like Italy and Japan have the lowest fertility rates of developed countries. Places where women are welcomed in the work force and well supported like the Scandinavian countries and to some degree the U.S. have much higher fertility rates. So, Japan's situation indicates that stay-at-home wives are not having many children; it may be because it is expensive to educate children, there is little childcare, and husbands are still expected to work long hours. People have been talking for years about the underutilization of educated Japanese women. You would think that would change because they are having a shortage of labor. Instead of bringing in immigrants, which they aren't comfortable with, why don't they just give support to women?

The role of women is changing certainly in areas where they can be more independent as doctors, as small business people, as academics. Those women are doing much better than they are in the corporate world, not surprisingly. The fertility rate would probably improve if women find that there is child care support and support for aging parents and better social services. Exhorting people to have children as a civic duty doesn't help.

It will be interesting to see how that develops because more and more young Japanese women just aren't interested in getting married. We see many bright women marrying foreigners or going to work for foreign companies. The embassy has certainly benefited from that, as some of the best FSNs are women who prefer the embassy to Japanese institutions.

Q: When you were on the Japanese desk at this time did you find that in a way you were in competition with the China desk? In other words, with China being a newly emerging power, a huge power, and Japan suffering from economic troubles, did you have fight for attention from higher levels?

WHITE: Certainly the Japanese felt that way. They used the phrase "Japan passing" throughout the Clinton administration, claiming that Washington wasn't paying much attention to them compared to China. I often responded that it was because China was a problem. If you have a problem, you're naturally going to spend more time working the problem as opposed spending time with the good, steady, strong ally.

It sometimes was difficult to set up meeting with high level Japanese and senior USG officials. For example there is a regular meeting called the Two plus Two which we try to have annually. The four are the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense plus the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the head of the Japanese Defense Agency. We usually tried to do it in New York at the time of the UN General Assembly. You could always be sure of having the Japanese Foreign Minister and the Secretary of State there, but coordinating schedules for all four people was always very difficult. Some of the Secretaries of Defense felt it was just a formality and really not that interesting.

Q: During the 2000 election campaign, when Gore and Bush were running against each other, did China come up as an issue?

WHITE: I don't think Asian issues were very important, though it seemed to be a fashion for one side to accuse the other of being soft on China, then when a new group comes to office they realize that reality is tougher to deal with than rhetoric. There was only one mention of Japan in the debates as far as we could tell, so Japan was clearly not a campaign issue.

Q. Did you get involved in the transition with the Clinton and Bush administrations?

WHITE: Yes, but in a fairly routine way. We prepared paper and briefed people. There was a fairly smooth transition at the NSC because they had a strong Japan person, Michael Green, who headed the Asia office. He'd been an academic as well as in and out of government and he knew all the players. The new Deputy Secretary was Richard Armitage who had a strong Japan background and many personal contacts. He had spent a lot of time in Japan both in his navy days, as a consultant and at DOD. He understood Japan and he understood the importance of meeting and greeting visiting delegations. Access to the 7th floor by visiting delegations of Japanese politicians, for example, really improved because Rich was always ready to sit down and talk to them - he knew most of them anyway. The Japanese were very pleased. They saw quite a shift from what they saw as benign neglect under the Clinton administration to having strong connections in the administration. Jim Kelly who became Assistant Secretary of State had been at the East West Center in Hawaii and also was very familiar with Japan and Japan issues. In that sense you had real experts coming in and we certainly didn't need to do a lot of briefing up on the major issues, particularly in the security area.

One of the final things I did was to work with Howard Baker to prepare for his ambassadorial hearings. He was part of a long time of really superb ambassadors that Japan has had.

Q: We've made a real point of putting our top people there.

WHITE: Yes. They include Mike Mansfield, Mike Armacost, Walter Mondale and Tom Foley. Ambassador Foley, who had been Speaker of the House, served in the last years of the Clinton Administration. The Japanese were pleased that he was followed by Howard Baker from the Senate side, who was well respected by Democrats and Republicans. He was an excellent nominee. As his wife was Senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker, most people thought either one of them would have been a superb ambassador. His confirmation hearing was like a coronation. The room was filled and all the senators on the committee were there. Nobody had any questions. They basically just wanted to make their speech saying what a great choice Howard Baker was. It was fun to watch and a nice change from so many difficult ambassadorial hearings.

Q: Had he had much experience dealing with Japan from the Senate side?

WHITE: He had a reasonably good background in Japan without being an Asia expert. He traveled there and had a lot of contact with Japanese politicians and business people. He had been serving as a lawyer in Washington since leaving the Senate so he was well aware of the key issues and the concerns of Washington.

Q: When did you leave the desk?

WHITE: In June of 2001.

Q: Where did you go?

WHITE: I went on a two year tour - which turned out to the last two years of my career - to the National Defense University at Ft. McNair. There is a program whereby three State people teach at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), which is where I went, and others go to the National War College which on the same base/campus. It is a valuable exchange program. Usually there are eight or ten State Department mid-level officers and civil servants in classes with the military and other civilian government employees. I taught economics and a Japan regional studies course.

Q: ICAF was concentrated mainly on logistics and the supply of the military wasn't it?

WHITE: That was part of the curriculum and that aspect distinguished it from other senior military schools. Its mission was to determine how to maintain the industrial base to supply the military machine and the logistics of getting material to the right places. But the curriculum went far beyond that, with a lot of broader strategic thinking as well. The school groomed lieutenant colonels, commanders, captains and colonels to move on to the next level and then on to the most senior positions.

In the spring semester, there was an interesting program of industry studies. Small groups divide into about 20 sectors, some of them clearly military related like steel, shipbuilding, aircraft, space, but others with more broad implications like biotech and education and health care. The groups have speakers throughout the semester and do various field trips and spend two weeks traveling overseas focusing on their industries. I was able to learn a great deal by participating as a teacher in these industry studies. The first year I followed biotech and the second year construction.

Q: What was the focus of the military people when you talked about Japan?

WHITE: In the fall semester the students chose a region or country to specialize in. For the Japan class I tended to get some people who had been there and wanted to know more about where they'd been, particularly those who had been stationed in Okinawa, and others who either didn't get their first choice or just wanted to learn a little more about an Asian country. There were about 10 classes during the semester and I gave a few on history, including the World War II legacy issues which affect Japan's current relations with China and Korea. There was a class on economics, but more of the focus was on Japan's politics, security establishment, Self-Defense Forces, and the U.S.-Japan security relationships. I gave a few classes myself and got speakers from around town.

Q: By this time you've spent an awful lot of time looking at Japan. Drawing a line out into the future, where do you see Japan? What sort of a role do you see Japan playing in Asia and globally?

WHITE: In terms of the U.S. relationship with Japan, I think it's extremely important, though in the public eye it gets little attentioperhaps because it has been so stable in political and security terms. The U.S. Japan relationship really has been a foundation for this country in Asia. East Asia has a number of potential flash points that point out the importance of having such a stable security relationship. For example, the China/Taiwan question, North Korea's nuclear ambitions on the one hand and great economic weakness on the other, Japan's difficult history with its neighbors. There are a number of smaller territorial disputes among countries

Economically speaking, despite Japan's slow growth of the last 12 years, it is still the second biggest economy in the world. It is enormously advanced technologically. It has a very educated hardworking work force. It has a great many problems such as an aging population, a lack of creativity, and not always beneficial complicated bureaucratic/ business/government ties, but its future could go either way. It could come back and become a great economic power again or it could just sort of slowly decline, but one way or another it's going to be very important for U.S. interests.

Finally, Japan is an enormously complex country and I think a fascinating study for people who have gotten to know it. There are many contradictions that one comes to appreciate when living there and visiting frequently - social relationships, economic ties, etc. - and it takes a long time to begin to understand the culture and society. But it is very rewarding.

I got into the Japan field serendipitously. I had never studied Japan or even Asia in college, but I am delighted with the way it turned out. It was a wonderful place to live in the '80s and I have found it a very interesting country to watch. I'm pleased to be able to continue as coordinator for the Japan Advanced Area Studies here at FSI. That keeps me involved in the latest issues of the day because I have to get speakers, find articles, find readings, but also it gets me acquainted with the new generation that's going off to serve in Japan.

Q: Well, you retired when?

WHITE: September 2003.

Q: You're teaching at FSI now?

WHITE: Yes. The Japan Area Studies class is for the people who are studying Japanese full time. We have area studies every two weeks for the year, covering history, culture, politics, economics, social issues and current events. I have a second part time job, which is running the Japan -America Student Conference. That program brings 40 American college students and 40 Japanese college students together each year in August, alternating countries each year. It's been going on since 1934 so it's an excellent program and has created strong bilateral ties.

Q: What's your impression of the new cadre of Japanese hands that are coming out of FSI? Are they different?

WHITE: It is different because a lot more people now join the State Department speaking Japanese. They're the ones I don't necessarily see because unless they are studying Japanese, they're not taking area studies. A lot of them have come through the JET program, which is Japan English Teaching set up by the Ministry of Education in Japan some years ago to bring native English speakers from Canada, U.S., India, Australia to Japanese schools. They are sent all over the country to small villages and big cities and work with Japanese teachers in English classes. It's a good thing for recent American college graduates who come back with great enthusiasm for Japan and often good language skills. As I say, that's a change. When I joined the Foreign Service, Japanese wasn't taught at that many colleges and people like me started from scratch. It's been very much to the benefit of the State Department.

Q. Thank you.

End of interview